

POSITIVITY

Reversing the Negativity Bias

By Justin Molocznik

On the spectrum of positive to negative approaches, where do you land with your safety and health practice? Would you call yourself an optimist or a pessimist? Working in the OSH profession can be unforgiving when responsibilities take us to an ill or injured worker, an incident causing high-dollar property damage, or a serious near-miss.

Because of these responsibilities, the people and organizations we represent might associate negative events with safety and health. However erroneous and uninformed, this association can impact you as an OSH professional and your workplace. Over time, you may even start to believe negativity is the only way you can communicate as a safety professional, using tactics such as shock or fear to drive behaviors or gain the attention of decision makers and stakeholders.

Unfortunately, this approach is common, but what if the negativity association were not just a coincidence? Psychologically, we are programmed to respond more intently to negative stimuli (Ito et al., 1998). The negativity bias, or the propensity to attend to, learn from and use negative information far more than positive information, has been found to be evolutionary and critical in development in childhood infancy (Vaish et al., 2008). So, when you sense that you or your colleagues are always pulling toward the negative, it is not just happenstance. And while we cannot change this psychological predisposition, we can maintain an awareness of how negativity bias can impact us and our approach to safety.

Being surrounded by negativity can be all encompassing, impacting decision-making, relationships, motivation, how we form opinions on situations, how we see the world and what impressions we form. Think about it this way in relation to safety and health: With a negative bias when completing an incident investigation, it is much more difficult to be impartial than to find fault and formulate an accusatory opinion of the individuals involved in the situation.

In addition to self-awareness around negativity, as a safety professional, it is important to understand the impact on the teams we work with. If we are constantly being focused on negative outcomes by leadership and those we serve, opportunities to be proactive will be nonexistent. Following this train of thought, negativity bias could lead to a reactive culture, which does not work well in organizational progression around safety and health.

To understand the direction our industry is headed, I recommend familiarizing yourself with the Safety II ideologies. A summary

for this discussion: In a traditional approach to safety (Safety I), focus is on the management of preventing a few things going wrong (negative), whereas a Safety II approach focuses on making sure as many things as possible go right (positive; Hollnagel et al., 2015). This ideology fits well with changing negative perspectives around safety and health.

Overcoming an innate trait such as negativity bias can seem insurmountable. But you can take several actions from the positive psychology world to help redirect this behavior. One approach involves reframing the situation. As noted, with a negative bias in completing an incident investigation, the focus could fall to a blame, faultfinding or disciplinary culture. If we reframe the situation (even starting by not calling it an investigation to dispel defensive engagement), identifying everything that went correctly and building from these actions and behaviors, a more collaborative, positive outcome can be achieved. By directing thinking to positive moments and actions, and identifying strengths in individuals and situations, you can establish patterns and behaviors to combat negative bias.

Someone I have always thought of when associating positivity with safety and health practice is former ASSP Region I Vice President James Boretti, president and founder of Boretti Inc. I had a chance to discuss this subject with him recently. Our conversation covered both cultures and individuals, and James had some great insight into both organizational and personal positivity as an OSH professional. James believes there is great opportunity in influencing through positivity, but this can be difficult for inexperienced professionals to recognize. When I asked about dealing with negativity in the moment (both as an individual and influencer), he emphasized patience and recognition of opportunity, as opposed to fault.

James tells a great story of a debate between two experienced CIHs who had audited a site and identified a litany of issues. One professional stated that, out of duty, it

was important to report all issues and demand they be corrected immediately, while the other professional emphasized severity and allowed for prioritization of the issues. The latter was concerned about the ability for workers to make corrective actions, build upon employees' skills, abilities and knowledge, and not trying to tackle everything at once. I'm not doing the story service, but which of the two do you think would be more successful? By incorporating positivity, it is much easier to be part of the solution.

Sometimes being an OSH professional can feel like swimming upstream. While the energy expended on proactive elimination of hazards is what we want, we (and the people and organizations we serve) can get caught up in the lagging indicators, which can often lead to negativity. And while I am certainly not advocating for not being authentic when negativity is warranted or confusing negativity for being critical in thinking and analysis, I want to reemphasize that it can only make you a stronger safety professional to understand and recognize that you may be surrounded by individuals who have a predisposition to negativity and are associating it with safety, or you yourself may be making this association. Once you make that recognition, it's time to formulate a plan on how to influence a change to positivity. **PSJ**

References

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