

Your Personal Coach

By

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

My supervisor is constantly negative about everything. He never stands up for himself with his boss, and then takes out his frustration on the rest of us. I've known him for a long time and understand a little about his personal life. He's had a lot of losses and is a basically unhappy person. In spite of his behavior, I actually like him and feel sorry for him. But, his bad mood brings me down (and everyone else in our department). How do you work with someone like this without becoming negative yourself?

-- Joyce

Dear Joyce,

Referring to how we pick up “vibes” from other people, author Natalie Goldberg advised writers to hang out with each other because, “When you walk in the mist, you get wet.” She was speaking of how we affect each other by our proximity. Her words were meant to encourage those interested in improving their writing skills to surround themselves with people of like interest. But writers are not the only ones who “get wet” by being around others. We all pick up each other's energy, and that energy is not always positive.

Being around a negative person is similar to being around a staph infection. When you think about how another's negativity can make us sick, it is an apt – if somewhat disgusting – metaphor.

Your question is a good one and, in a way, has two parts: 1) How can you protect yourself from his negative energy? And 2) what, if anything, can you do to help your supervisor? Let's start with how you can help him.

Do you feel comfortable having a heart-to-heart talk with him? I hope that you do. You say you've known him for a long time and that you like him. Begin with those thoughts. Tell him you can't help but notice that his boss pushes him around and that, frankly, he takes his frustration out on the rest of the staff. Let him know how this makes you feel. The fact that he is your supervisor might make this conversation more difficult than if he were a co-worker or a friend. But I feel certain that you can share your feelings in a way that is gentle, as well as honest.

Have this conversation with him when you are not angry or upset with him. In your own heart, hold the intention that you really want to help him. It sounds to me like he lacks appropriate assertive behavior, and that his self-esteem has suffered as a result. People need – and deserve – genuine feedback. These kinds of authentic human interactions can often inspire change.

But remember that you can't change him. You can only change yourself. You can offer caring support and honest feedback, but if he chooses to remain in denial about his behavior and its impact on his staff, then you'll have to more effectively protect yourself. If he has been unhappy for a long time, he may be suffering from depression. If so, he would benefit from working with a psychologist or counselor, but that decision

have to be up to him. You'll have to play it by ear – feel how the conversation is going – before deciding to suggest this option or not.

In order to protect yourself, make sure your interpersonal boundaries are in good shape. No one can actually make us feel anything without our consent. Sometimes this “consent” is below the level of awareness, and we're not even conscious that we're somehow allowing someone else's mood to affect our own feelings.

You can learn tact and diplomacy, set healthy boundaries, and stand up for yourself with difficult people but, most importantly, you can learn to be strong and self-contained through your interactions with them. Remember, not everyone who comes in contact with a staph infection gets sick. Stay physically, emotionally, and spiritually strong.

There's a Zen teaching story that I love that tells of an enlightened old man who was confronted by a brazen young warrior. For hours, the young warrior hurled insults at the Master. Throughout it all, the Master stood motionless and calm.

After many hours, the young warrior left defeated and shamed. When the Master was asked how he endured such an indignity, he answered, “When someone comes to give you a gift and you do not receive it, to whom does the gift belong?”

So don't forget: that gift tag may have your name on it, but you don't have to sign to accept delivery. Be like this Zen master.

Conventional wisdom says that we can learn a great deal from difficult people, and while that's true, the lessons may be hard and frustrating. Make a decision that you will not allow your own positive attitude to be brought down by this unhappy guy. A good first step to maintaining your own positive energy is just being aware that you can control, and are responsible for, your own reactions to his moods.

Good luck and thanks for the great question. I've got a feeling that you're not the only one who works with someone putting out bad vibes.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com, call 473-4004, or direct questions to the Outer Banks Sentinel, P.O. Box 546, Nags Head, NC 27949.

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