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## How Your Workplace Might Be Making You Grumpy

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By Eileen Connolly-Robbins

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Ever had a day at work when you find yourself in a bad mood because the negative person in the next office over stops by for a gripe session? Or how about when your workday gets off to a productive start after you run into a coworker at the cafeteria who talks enthusiastically about a project she's working on?

Every single day, without realizing it or not, we're infected by the moods of those around us — a phenomenon that researchers call "emotional contagion." Just like we can catch a cold if someone sneezes on us, we can catch a mood from our coworkers or boss, and that emotional contagion can influence our perceptions, decision making and performance.

The idea that one person's mood can affect the performance of a group is of great interest to researchers who study organizational dynamics and leadership.

"Employees are not emotional islands," according to Sigal Barsade, PhD, a Professor of Management at The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, who does research on emotional contagion. In the February 2011 issue of the Wharton @ Work newsletter, Barsade noted that "executives can use their knowledge of the impact of mood contagion to create more positive team dynamics, increase performance, and decrease turnover by consciously managing their own emotions and the emotions they want to spread in their teams."

Barsade offered these tips to leaders:

- \* Take stock of your own mood. Then change it if it's not going to be helpful to your team. We already routinely check whether our notes are in order and our powerpoint is ready to go before heading into a meeting. Now consider adding a mood check. Am I calm? Hurried? Defensive? Anxious? Enthused? Focused?
- \* Consider what your non-verbal behaviors are conveying. Barsade uses the example of crossing your arms. For many of us, it's merely a habit, but the body posture can signal that you're feeling defensive or angry and perhaps are not open to new ideas. If you cross your arms, others in the room may soon follow suit and then everyone will appear to be in the shut-down mode.
- \* Make eye contact with everyone on your team. Barsade said that others are more likely to catch your positive emotions if you look directly at them.
- \* Neutralize negative emotions. Some coworkers don't even realize they give off bad vibes. If someone is always negative or critical, it might help to have a private discussion to get at the root of the issue. Minimizing eye contact with negative people during a meeting can help keep their mood from spreading.
- \* Create a positive culture. Barsade notes that research shows that anger is expressed more often than joy or happiness

in the workplace. That's unfortunate. Make sure you acknowledge accomplishments and mark happy occasions. Managers should lead by example and set the tone that rudeness and back-stabbing won't get you anywhere in the organization.

Getting a handle on emotional contagion in your workplace can be especially useful during these demanding times when everyone seems to be working harder and longer. You can choose to have people in your everyday orbit who enhance, not diminish, your energy and enthusiasm. That said, these suggested strategies shouldn't be interpreted as meaning you don't welcome opposing points of view. It's good to make specific and constructive complaints and to critique a situation or person honestly when needed. Creativity depends on giving-and-taking ideas, and every organization needs people who are willing to take a stand.

Joan Carter wouldn't have become the first female President of the Union League of Philadelphia if she wasn't able to set a good example as a leader. Joan, who is the speaker at our next Main Line Society of Professional event on March 14, became the first female president of the Union League of Philadelphia in its 148-year history, and she will share her story of leadership and perseverance. Expand your network at this event by also meeting members of the Union League Business Network! For more information or to register, please visit [www.spwmainline.com](http://www.spwmainline.com).

It's hard to change the tone of an organization overnight. But let's start by making a point this coming month to gauge our own emotions and, if needed, leave them at the door. Let's see if those around us start responding differently because we're not infecting them with counter-productive emotions.

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