

[ON THE LEVEL]

TRUE LEADERSHIP REQUIRES OPTIMISM IN TOUGH TIMES

by KATHLEEN J. WU

I know most lawyers have been in this situation: Heading into the first meeting of the day, feeling ready to take on whatever challenges await, until that confident attitude falls victim to someone whose constant complaining and negativity turns the “can-do” mood into “why bother?”

Most people have experienced times when one person’s bad attitude sends us looking for an economy-size bottle of St. John’s Wort. Unfortunately, these days, negativity is all around us. Firm layoffs continue unabated, the newscast fits more calamity into the first five minutes than seems humanly possible, and even the briefest glance at the stock market turns my stomach into knots. Yet there has never been a more important time to resist pessimism. That simple act can do quite a lot.

Many studies in group dynamics have shown that the group can have a profound effect on the individual, pointing to ethical lapses everywhere from military prisons to corporations as proof. While there’s no denying the validity of that argument, the effect of the individual on the group can be equally potent.

A fascinating study out of the Rotterdam School of Management at Erasmus University in The Netherlands brought this home. It showed that one person, under the right conditions, can bring down a whole team of problem-solvers. And, it seemed to imply, a single strong leader can keep that from happening.

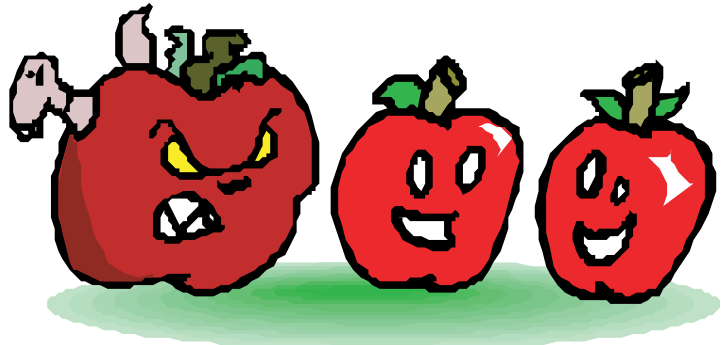
The so-called bad apple study brought together participants who were then divided into teams and given 45 minutes to solve a problem. Unbeknownst to the participants, one team had a “plant,” an actor who was told either to act like a jerk, a slacker or a pessimist. In almost every case, the group with the bad apple performed 30 percent to 40 percent worse than the groups without the bad apple.

The one exception, the study’s author told National Public Radio’s “This American Life,” which featured the bad apple study in December, was a single group in which one member was a strong leader. This person, who coincidentally was the son of a diplomat, was able to override the bad apple’s effect by asking for input from all team members and listening to others’ opinions.

It can be difficult not to dwell on the ubiquitous bad news in the world and the workplace. It can be nearly impossible not to get stressed out, depressed and angry about it. But it’s also not hard to see where bad apple behavior can lead. Pessimism is infectious: If left unchecked, it can spread through a firm faster than a rumor, driving down productivity and worsening already shaky morale.

Spread Hope

But the opposite also is true: Optimism can be just as infectious as pessimism. And lawyers don’t have to be partners (or a leader with



any kind of official title) to model optimism.

Position power, which comes purely from a title or position, has limited authority. Sure, it works when the powerful person can bark out an order and get others to comply. But showing real leadership requires relying on personal power, whatever it is inside each of us that has the capacity to inspire others.

Lawyers are by design problem-solvers, so although we’re hardwired to play devil’s advocate, we’re just as programmed to find solutions for our clients. In this economy, it’s worth the effort to apply that attitude to ourselves, our colleagues and our firms.

I really do not buy into the whole “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself” maxim. There are plenty of things to fear, like getting laid off, losing a house, starving and being beset by packs of feral dogs. But it doesn’t do anyone any good to dwell on those things. The only thing each lawyer can do is work to prevent the worst from happening.

Only a handful of government officials are actually empowered to do something about the nation’s current economic crisis. The rest of us probably cannot do anything to fix the overall economy. But, speaking on behalf of firm management everywhere, all lawyers are empowered to focus on their jobs, spread optimism and be their firms’ equivalent of the diplomat’s son.

The stakes are simply too high to be the bad apple. TTL



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