



# SkillSharpener Web Extra

## Avoid “toxic talk” when dealing with customers, clients and coworkers

**Toxic talk — critical, cynical, or just negative language about customers, coworkers and management — can be deadly. A poisonous workplace can lead to poor morale, lack of trust, stress-related illnesses, and low customer satisfaction ratings.**

Who wants to work in an environment like that?

No one, says Jeanne O’Brien, a customer service manager for Mile High Foods. And while management can do a lot to battle toxic talk and support a more positive work environment, there’s much that the individual can do as well. It all starts with an attitude assessment.

### Don’t be a “department critic”

A “department critic” is someone who is constantly critical about the perceived shortcomings of others — whether it’s customers, coworkers, other departments, or managers.

Even one negative individual can have a demoralizing and often polarizing effect on the department. That’s because, “the negative language, the negative words, turn into negative behaviors — toward the customer, toward internal customers, and toward each other. And you can’t be productive and successful in that type of environment,” says O’Brien.

Are you overly critical? A first step to find out is to take an inventory over the course of the day of the comments you have made about others. Do your positive, reinforcing comments outweigh those that are negative? If not, says O’Brien, it’s time to “take a look in the mirror and ask, ‘How

does it make the other person feel when I say something negative or behave negatively toward them? Is that what I want to be in that person’s life?’”

Another thing that O’Brien suggests is that reps apply the same tools and techniques that they use with customers — listening skills, using positive language, keeping a smile in one’s voice, avoiding negative language and phrases, and building rapport — with their coworkers and others in the company.

And finally, avoiding “toxic talk” in the work place can be a team effort. At the very least, a customer service rep can ask a supervisor or a coworker whom they trust to listen to the language and behavior

### Avoid being a “toxic talker”

What can you do to avoid negativity and promote positive talk in the customer service center? Here are six ideas:

- Watch your own language, and avoid being negative with or critical of others.
- Ask someone you trust to review your language and to offer suggestions on how you can keep it positive.
- Write positive notes to yourself and post positive messages in your work area.
- Don’t contribute to or support the negativity of others in the workplace.
- Set an example by treating everyone — customers, coworkers, and others — in a friendly, positive, and professional manner.
- Instead of complaining about problems or other issues, reframe them as learning opportunities.





they display to customers, coworkers, and others, and to call them on it if they are being negative.

### Help build a positive team environment

During Mardi Gras last year O'Brien distributed Mardi Gras-themed noisemakers to her staff, and "whenever anyone heard someone else saying something negative, they would reach over the wall and shake their noisemaker at the person. And the other person would just grab it and say, 'OK, OK, I hear you. I get the message.'"

In many cases, O'Brien suggests, a negative attitude at work is a result of something negative that is going on at home, and it's important for reps to remember not to bring those thoughts and feelings into work with them. In one call center she worked in, for instance, O'Brien had a "lemon tree" set up in the center. "Each of the reps had a fuzzy lemon that they could put up on the tree when they came in. The lemon represented home-related issues they were dealing with. Reps could pick up the lemon again when they went home. The idea was that they couldn't have it during the day," she says.

According to O'Brien, "It was just a reminder that we were going into an environment where we needed to be positive and full of energy and ini-

tiative. And oftentimes those reps who had put up lemons would get sympathy and support from others on the issues they were dealing with, so it helped on a team level as well."

Service teams can also try what O'Brien calls her "penny strategy" for reducing toxic talk. Each team member starts with a container of 100 pennies. And whenever anyone on the team hears another member use negative language or negative behavior with a customer or another team member, they get to remove a penny from that person's container and add it to their own. Reps can also remove pennies from their container when they catch themselves being negative. At the end of the month, the rep with the most pennies gets a small reward.

### Making each team member whole

Avoiding a toxic environment also helps improve teamwork at software company SignUp4. Vice president Danita Harn, offers a simple but elegant way to think about the words you use. When the company hires new team members, they let them know right away that SignUp4 is a "non-toxic environment." Harn explains, "By that we mean: There is no talking about people, you must talk to them." Good words to live by. ■

