

IMPORTANT STEPS TO ERADICATE NEGATIVITY IN THE WORKPLACE

Tend to Your Invisible Healthcare Environment

By Joe Tye

The Invisible Healthcare Environment

When I walk into your facility, my first impression will be created by the visible architecture. Is it beautifully designed and well-maintained?

But if I'm a patient, visitor, or new employee, that first impression will quickly be replaced by what I see of what I call your organization's Invisible Architecture™ of

values, culture, and attitude. Are people emotionally positive? Do they treat me and others with respect? Are they friendly and cheerful in the hallways? Do they talk to each other, or do they talk about each other behind their backs?

If you walk through the main lobby of Midland Memorial Hospital (MMH) in West Texas at 8:16 on any weekday morning you will see an administrative huddle where,

depending upon the day, between 50 and 100 people are gathered for a quick update. If you stop to listen you'll hear the group reciting The Pickle Pledge: "I will turn every complaint into either a blessing or a constructive suggestion." If you look closely, you'll see that most of the people in the huddle are not reading the pledge — they know it by heart. The way MMH employees have embraced this commitment to

transform negative attitudes into positive action has been responsible for significant improvements in both employee and patient satisfaction.

It has also achieved something more important: It is helping people to be more positive at a personal level. The research has been done and the verdict is clear: Your attitude profoundly influences not only your career success, but it also has a huge impact upon your health, your happiness, and your longevity. Toxic emotional negativity (TEN) — as reflected in complaining, finger-pointing, gossiping, and other emotionally negative behaviors — is malignant in the same way that cancer is malignant. A negative attitude contributes to feelings of helplessness, victimhood, and hopelessness. These in turn compromise your immune system and your ability to foster personal health and fight off disease.

TEN is also contagious. One emotional vampire (we call them Pickle Suckers because people who are always complaining look like they've been sucking on a dill pickle) can drag down the morale and productivity of an entire work unit the way one person lighting a cigarette in a room instantly pollutes the lungs of everybody else in that room. In their Harvard Business School working paper, *Toxic Workers*, Michael Housman and Dylan

Minor conclude that “avoiding a toxic worker (or converting him to an average worker) enhances [overall department] performance to a much greater extent than replacing an average worker with a superstar worker.” It is a fundamental management responsibility to not allow toxically negative employees to bring down morale and productivity.

Unfortunately, in many organizations the inner emotional environment is not nearly as beautiful and well-maintained as the visible architecture is. The health-care literature is filled with words like bullying, burnout, compassion fatigue, and disengagement. In the culture assessment survey we conduct for client organizations, on average more people disagree than agree with the statement that they and their coworkers have positive attitudes, treat others with respect, and refrain from toxic emotional negativity.

That is the healthcare crisis within. If every employee and provider at every hospital, long-term care facility, and outpatient clinic in America strongly agreed with the statement, “Our people reflect positive attitudes, treat others with respect, and refrain from complaining, gossiping, or pointing fingers,” then we would far more effectively deal with the challenges of the external environment.

“Environmental services professionals are in a unique position to have a positive impact on this inner environment. They are physically present and visible in every area of the organization; they have frequent opportunities to interact with patients, visitors, and coworkers; and they are often seen as informal leaders.”



**I've Taken
The Pickle Pledge**

**“I will turn every complaint
into either a blessing or
constructive suggestion.”**

By taking **The Pickle Pledge**, I am promising myself that I will no longer waste my time and energy on blaming, complaining, and gossiping, nor will I commiserate with those who steal my energy with their blaming, complaining, and gossiping.

* So called because chronic complainers look like they've been sucking on a dill pickle stick in their mouths.

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Environmental services professionals are in a unique position to have a positive impact on this inner environment. They are physically present and visible in every area of the organization; they have frequent opportunities to interact with patients, visitors, and coworkers; and they are often seen as informal leaders. Paradoxically, precisely because of stereotyped impressions of where “housekeepers” fall on the status totem pole, a collective change in attitudes and behaviors by environmental services professionals is more likely to be noticed than one made by any other group within the organization.

The Pickle Pledge

Hundreds of books and articles have been published on culture change in recent years. Almost all of them overlook this central reality: *Culture does not change unless and until people change.* Culture is shaped by the collective attitudes, behaviors, and habits of the people who work in the organization. If people don’t make personal changes, then culture will not change. But people will not change unless they are given tools for making those changes, and inspired to use those tools.

The Pickle Pledge is a simple (though by no means always easy) promise that one makes to oneself and to others to turn every complaint into either a blessing (“my head is killing me” becomes “thank God for modern pharmacology”) or a constructive suggestion (“the first symptom of dehydration is a headache, so I should drink some water”). By taking to heart the footnote, one is also committing to not allow toxically negative coworkers to sap their energy (or to ever do that to anyone else).

In organizations where people take this to heart, we are seeing phenomenal culture change. We’ve heard from hospital CEOs who have told us that some of their most negative people are leaving — not because of a disciplinary process but because their coworkers simply don’t put up with them anymore. We’ve heard stories of people making incredible changes in their personal attitudes (and consequently in their self-image and self-esteem). People have taken The Pickle Pledge home and shared it with family members. One nurse told me that her

house was very quiet for several weeks, but then, for the first time ever, family members started talking about things that really matter instead of just whining about the complaint of the day.

Key Success Factors

In our work with hundreds of hospitals and other healthcare organizations, we have identified a number of important steps to eradicate toxic emotional negativity and promote a more positive and productive culture of ownership.

1 Start with an objective assessment:

One of the first things we do with health care clients is conduct a Culture Assessment Survey. This helps to identify problems and potential areas for improvement, gives a baseline to monitor future progress, and in many cases challenges overly optimistic assumptions about how people perceive their current culture. You can do your own quick assessment of the degree to which your organization, or your department, has a healthy culture of ownership here: <http://valuescoach.com>.

2 Leadership engagement:

Whether The Pickle Challenge is being conducted by a single department or an entire organization, the single best predictor of a sustained positive impact is the engagement and role-modeling of the management team. Make sure leaders in your area are modeling the expected behaviors, and that there is a common approach to dealing with inappropriate attitudes and behaviors in the workplace.

3 Ask for a personal commitment:

One of the most effective actions for a successful culture change initiative is asking people to sign and post The Florence Challenge Certificate of Commitment to be more emotionally positive, self-empowered, and fully engaged. You can download the Certificate of Commitment at the Resources page of www.TheFlorenceChallenge.com.

4 Make it fun:

The Pickle Challenge is a great opportunity to unleash your people’s creativity — to do good things and have fun in the process. We’ve seen singing pickles, dancing pickles, pickle

piñata parties, pickle cake decorating contests, and dozens of other creative ideas. One of the most popular activities is a pickle jar decorating contest, with people being invited to deposit a 25-cent “whine fine” whenever they catch themselves or others wallowing in a negative attitude.

5 Keep it visible:

The first thing people see when coming through the employee entrance of Midland Memorial Hospital is the Big Pickle — a chainsaw carving created by one of their coworkers. That’s just one of many visible reminders throughout the hospital. At another hospital, environmental services staff posted The Pickle Pledge in restrooms; they call it “potty training.”

6 Plow through resistance:

As with any positive culture change initiative, there will be resistance to The Pickle Challenge, and it will be most vociferous from the people who are the biggest problems and who could most benefit from having a more positive attitude themselves. It is imperative that management have the courage and determination to stay focused on promoting a more positive workplace until it becomes part of the cultural DNA.

7 Measure your progress:

After the first year of its Values and Culture Initiative, we conducted a follow-up Culture Assessment Survey at Midland Memorial Hospital. The self-reported level of toxic emotional negativity had been cut in half, resulting in an annual cultural productivity benefit of more than \$7 million. Patient satisfaction levels had gone to record highs by the end of the year. More important, nearly nine out of 10 respondents reported being more personally positive as a result of the initiative. Measuring your progress and sharing success stories is essential to maintaining motivation and momentum and not allowing the effort to degenerate into just another “program of the month.”

The Pickle Challenge for Charity

During 2015, Values Coach challenged 12 different client hospitals to raise a certain amount of money — typically \$1,000, all in quarters — in a one-week period by having people catch themselves and

coworkers complaining, gossiping, or otherwise engaging in toxic emotional negativity. When this happened, they would be invited to deposit a quarter in a pickle jar. If the hospital hit the target and donated that money to an appropriate charity (typically the employee assistance fund), then we agreed to match the donation.

During the year, we wrote matching donation checks totaling \$10,300. That represents 40,900 individual episodes of TEN being caught midstream, one quarter at a time, all in just a one-week period. If sustained for a full year, in those 12 organizations' more than two million incidents of complaining, finger-pointing, rumor-mongering and other forms of TEN will be prevented.

Extrapolated to the entire healthcare system, we could eradicate more than a billion individual episodes of TEN every year if every hospital, long-term care facility, and outpatient clinic made a good-faith effort to honor The Pickle Pledge. Fixing this healthcare crisis within would go a long way toward helping us to more

effectively deal with the health care crisis in the external environment.

Let me close with this: If I could wave a magic wand over your organization so that for 30 days there would be no bitching, moaning, whining and complaining (the *other* BMW Club!), you would never again tolerate toxic emotional negativity in the workplace — the way we will never again allow anyone to pollute the physical environment with toxic cigarette smoke. The CEO of a client hospital in Nebraska sent us a note saying, "I got a whole new team and didn't have to change the

people because they changed themselves." Being able to say such a thing is the gold standard of positive cultural transformation.

Remember, culture does not change unless and until people change. And the real winners in this process are those people who make the change.

Joe Tye is CEO and head coach, Values Coach, Inc., and author of *The Florence Prescription: From Accountability to Ownership*. He can be reached at Joe@ValuesCoach.com or 319-624-3889.

Special offer from the author

If you would like a complimentary copy of *The Florence Prescription* and a Pickle-Free Zone door hanger, email Michelle Arduser at Michelle@ValuesCoach.com with your mailing address.

The Bed Bug Baker

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Findings by Molly L. Stedfast, MS and Dini M. Miller, PhD of Virginia Tech.

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— Published in *PCT Magazine*, June 2015



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