Speedbump #2: Negative People

Do you have a team member who says "no" to your ideas before he or she has given them a decent listen? For whatever reason, some individuals always have to say "no" before they can see clear to even considering something new. These "no men" (gender-neutral) are more annoying and useless, at least in the short term, than "yes men"—and that's really saying something. I call them "autonegatives." These people love to criticize and tear down ideas before they've given them any real thought.

Autonegatives are everywhere in life. Some may be masquerading as your friends or family. Sometimes you run into them in stores (though the smart manager doesn't leave them in place for long). At work, information hoarders tend to be autonegatives, some because they like the tiny thrill of power it gives them. Others misinterpret their directives or job descriptions. Some are simply lazy and have taken the "just say no" approach a little too far.

Sometimes, the only way to distinguish an autonegative from someone genuinely trying to help is to work with them over time. Helpful people won't always say "no" first. Autonegatives usually will. They do themselves no favors by doing so, especially if their team members and leader fall into the can-do type. Eventually, their behavior may lead to their dismissal, a relatively painless process in the current "at-will" workplace—at least for the organization.

Yes, it's important to bring up an idea's problems or shortcomings; perhaps you tried something before and found it didn't work. Then again, something that didn't work a few years ago might today, if technology has caught up with it or the environment has changed.

How can you tell if your team members perceive you as an autonegative?

Let me give you an illustration. I live in Highlands Ranch, CO, about 30 minutes south of Denver. Ten minutes further south is an open space area called Daniel's Park. A dirt road winds along there, which was a stagecoach line in 1865. You can walk along the ruts, visit the two log cabins that are still there, and envision the stagecoach passing by. A set of placards along the line give you a mini history lesson. I was surprised to discover how stagecoach fares were charged. There were actually three classes of service: first class, second class, and third class, which seems strange there could be different classes of service, since a stagecoach was basically a big box, with no shocks, and no separate compartments. But frequently on a journey, the road would get rough, or rocky, or muddy. The horses would have a difficult time going uphill in some conditions. When this happened, the distinctions between classes of service became crystal clear. When the road was rough, the first class passengers got to stay inside the stagecoach. The second class passengers had to get out and walk to alleviate the strain

on the horses. But the third class passengers had to get out and PUSH. In a team, the first-class team members have a third-class attitude. They are the ones who get out and PUSH when the going gets tough. They don't sit back, say negative things, watch everyone else struggle, laugh at them, and tell them exactly why it can't be done. You personally take action and jump in to help. Autonegatives simply sit back and relax in the stagecoach and let their team members pull them along.

The road can be rocky, and you can encounter obstacles on your journey, but when the going gets tough, the tough get going. So how can you help your team go faster? Get out of the stagecoach and push! Don't be the autonegative who always moans and groans about how terrible everything is, while everyone else is straining to get to the top of the hill.

Stop and think before you say "no" next time. Maybe you're the negative one! If the word "no" seems to pop out automatically, listen carefully. If a team member's request or idea deserves criticism or refusal, wait until they're done. Then explain why and offer a solution. But if you have no reason why something won't work, hold your tongue.