

REALITY-BASED LEADERSHIP

Ego Bypass Toolkit

NEGATIVE BRAINSTORMING EXERCISE

One of the most useful tools for transitioning a team from resistance to success in spite of circumstances is called “negative brainstorming.” You’ll need a whiteboard or a big flip-chart to get started. Here’s how it works:

1. First, the rules: Each individual can introduce his or her concerns, one at a time, in front of the group, while you write them down (leaving ample space in between for the next step in the exercise). The other members of the group must refrain from discussion, critique, or disagreement, and wait their turns. Continue until the group has exhausted its concerns and all concerns have been documented.
2. Title the list of concerns “Risks.” Point out that all concerns are simply risks, and that the true power of the team lies in its ability to mitigate risks. This idea is at the heart of the exercise, and it’s the reason it works.
3. Taking it risk by risk, ask the team to honestly evaluate the probability of each risk manifesting itself. Assign each a probability of “high,” “medium,” or “low.” Next, evaluate the potential impact of each risk and again label it “high,” “medium,” or “low.”
4. Now comes the negative brainstorming. Redirect all the energy that the team was putting into resistance or dissent and harness it to create strategies to mitigate each risk that is of “medium” to “high” probability or impact.

Teams that can move from using expertise to resist and editorialize to using those same talents and expertise to “make it work” are the teams that successfully position themselves as valuable assets and credible witnesses. That’s why it can be positive to get negative with your team – but only in the service of moving things forward, creating great results, and succeeding in spite of challenging circumstances.

When you trust people with this kind of exercise, you show your faith not only in their talents, but also in their good intentions. Negative brainstorming provides Reality-Based leaders with a constructive way to get concerns out on the table and gives dissent a place within a healthy team dynamic. It’s an especially great tool to keep leading constructively even when your company has done something you, the leader, do not like. It’s tempting to stop leading under those circumstances, but instead – once again – your responsibility is to redirect everyone’s focus. (You go first!) In the end, it’s all about the overarching vision of what you have joined together to create, because risks are here to stay. Your perspective is what matters.



Negative Brainstorming Exercise

ISSUES --> RISKS	PROBABILITY	IMPACT
1) Example: We don't have enough resources to manage this.	H M L	H M L
2)	H M L	H M L
3)	H M L	H M L
4)	H M L	H M L
5)	H M L	H M L
6)	H M L	H M L

THE REALITY-BASED LEADER'S BOTTOM LINE

Individuals may identify problems but cross-functional teamwork may be necessary to solve problems. Do not buy into the limiting belief that people should only come to you with solutions. This idea was likely born out of a need to stop people from whining and complaining. Wouldn't it be more direct to simply tell them that their whining is hindering the team's efforts? Try negative brainstorming to get things done.