Negativity Instinct

Idea In Short

The Negativity Instinct is the 2nd among the 10 instincts identified in this book. This instinct describes our tendency to notice the bad more than the good (e.g. believing that things are getting worse when things are actually getting better).

The negativity instinct describes our tendency to notice the bad more than the good. Rosling invites readers to think of the world as a premature baby in an incubator. He writes,

> Does it make sense to say that the infant's situation is improving? Yes. Absolutely. Does it make sense to say it is bad? Yes, absolutely. Does saying "things are improving" imply that everything is fine, and we should all relax and not worry? No, not at all. Is it helpful to have to choose between bad and improving? Definitely not. It's both. It's both bad and better. Better, and bad, at the same time. That is how we must think about the current state of the world.

When you hear about something terrible, calm yourself by asking whether there had been equally large positive improvements that you could have missed hearing about. A large percentage of rhetoric disseminated by media, governments and security professionals is typically a message of doom and gloom. Correspondingly, you tend to hear and pay more attention to bad news than good news. This distortion instills a sense of negativity, which is a well-established tactic. Fear, uncertainty and doubt (abbreviated as FUD) is a strategic attempt to influence perception by disseminating negative and dubious or false information. The term – FUD - appeared in contexts as early as the 1920s.

Reality check

Humans pay attention to the bad rather than good. Many believe that the world is getting worse and romanticize the good old days. This is true to a certain extent. For example, the

environmental pollution is getting worse and terrorism is more devastating than it was a few decades ago. Nevertheless, the state of world affairs is generally on an upward trajectory. However, these developments largely go unnoticed because they aren't reported. Hence, we tend to be nostalgic about the past. Today, even minor incidents receive far greater coverage than they deserve. If you look at the news, you'll be perceive that the world is on a downward trend. However, the facts reveal another story. In the 1800s, most people in the world were at Level 1, marked by extreme poverty. However, only 9% of the world is still at Level 1 today. Life expectancy has improved from 31 years in the 1800s to over 70 years today. Slavery has been abolished, child mortality is down, access to basic amenities, such as electricity, water and health have improved. Yet, we mistakenly conclude that nothing has improved, when in fact, our world has largely become a safer and better place. Still, we tend to have a pessimistic view of the world. This is because we tend to judge by feelings rather than by logic.

Negativity bias

The negativity bias is the tendency for humans to pay more attention or give more weight to negative experiences over neutral or positive experiences. Even when negative experiences are inconsequential, humans tend to focus on the negative. According to Verywell Mind, we humans, we are hard-wired for negativity. Criticisms have a greater impact than compliments. Likewise, bad news frequently draws more attention than good. This phenomenon is called negativity bias. It describes our tendency to register and dwell more readily on negative stimuli and events than positive ones. This bias, also known as positive-negative asymmetry, implies that we feel the sting of a rebuke more powerfully than we feel the joy of praise. To cite Linus, the Peanuts character:

> Good things last eight seconds...Bad things last three weeks.

In social psychology, negative traits have been shown to disproportionately affect impression formation. The Prospect Theory - developed by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky in 1979 - demonstrates that we tend to be risk averse due to our biased weighting of probabilities. Since we dislike losses more than equivalent gains, we are willing to take more risks to avoid a loss. Likewise, we also avoid choosing options that might result in loss. For example, we strongly feel about losing € 20 than we are happy about winning € 20.

Evolutionary baggage

According to psychologist Rick Hanson, a negativity bias has been built into our brains based on millions of years of evolution when it comes to dealing with threats. Our ancestors lived in difficult environments. They had to gather food while avoiding deadly obstacles. Noticing, reacting to, and remembering predators and natural hazards [negative] became more important than finding food [positive]. Those who avoided the negative situations passed on their genes. So, our ancestors developed heuristics (short-cuts) to deal with bad news or negative traits that signaled danger. From an evolutionary perspective, learning to identify potentially hazardous situations was vital for survival in a harsh environment rich in predators. While today's world has arguably fewer threats, humans are still wired for self-preservation. Today, we may not need to be on constant high alert for survival like our ancestors. However, negativity bias still affects how we act, react, feel, and think.

Dealing with negativity

It only takes one bad apple to spoil the bunch. It age old adage describes the effect that moods transfer among people in a relatively short period of time. Emotional contagion is the psychological term for this phenomenon. In the article titled, Our emotional neighbourhoods, the authors Peter Totterdell, Karen Niven and David Holman explored how our social networks regulate what we feel.

> Field research on work and sport teams has found that individuals' moods change in synchrony with the collective mood of their teammates and in particular with the mood of a team leader.

The bottom line is when our friends and colleagues are happy, we are more likely to be happy. In contrast, people who express negativity can be emotional black holes. Everyone who comes in contact with them suffers the consequences. To minimize the effect of negativity in your consulting life:

Reframe the situation

As a consultant, chances are you are exposed to negative feedback from diverse sources during an engagement. Some of the pessimistic client stakeholders that participated in your

interviews / workshops may paint a gloomy future. Immunizing yourself from such negativity is pivotal to functioning effectively as a consultant. Your messaging plays a large role in shaping how you perceive and interpret events. When you find yourself interpreting something in a negative way, take a step back. Look for ways to reframe the events in a more positive light that can generate action. The psychological term for re-framing is reappraisal, a term coined by Alison Wood Brooks, the O'Brien Associate Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School. In the Choiceology podcast titled, A Bundle of Nerves, she recommends:

> Think about all of the things that could go great and focus on those things to encourage an opportunity mindset, to lead to excitement rather than anxiety.

Focus on the challenges the client is facing. After all, you are engaged to help client resolve their challenges, so don't ignore the potential dangers. Also focus on the positive events that can help you turn-around the situation.

Establish new patterns

When you find yourself reflecting on negative scenarios, take the great piece of advise from William Ury, author of Getting to Yes. He advises going to the balcony and taking a view from a different perspective. Look for uplifting activities to pull yourself out of this negative mindset. This can be quite challenging as our emotions are entwined, especially in inter-personal client relationships. As consultants, we must distance ourselves from this idea of personal. Emotions lead to mistakes. We can get angry, defensive, frustrated, and irritated. These can derail a path of constructive dialogue, debate and brainstorming. Expand your dialogue to include more client stakeholders, listen to the viewpoints, absorb their concerns and seek a joint solution.

Celebrate achievements

It takes more for us to remember positive experiences. Hence, it is important to celebrate positive events that happen. Negativity gets quickly transferred and etched in your memory. So, you need to undertake more effort to get the same effect from positive moments. When something great happens, say a client shared a positive feedback during a workshop, take the time to share this message with the rest of the engagement team. Replay the moment several times in your memory and get your Partners and Senior Managers to include this

feedback in their weekly update email. Focus on the positive things, especially during challenging client engagements when the going gets hard.

Choose to smile

Responding to negativity with positivity requires a lot of empathy and is a difficult mindset shift to make. However, if you can learn to smile at negativity, you can transform your weltanschauung. The world will certainly appear to be a much better place. By smiling, you demonstrate that you have the power over your emotions. According to a study published by Psychological Science, the act of smiling during stressful situations leads to reduced heart rates among participants.

> Smiling means that we are ourselves, that we have sovereignty over ourselves, that we are not drowned into forgetfulness. (Thich Nhat Hanh, Being Peace)

Law of the Garbage Truck

There will always be negative people around. If you aren't careful, they can take a toll on you and wreak emotional havoc. Have some strategies to combat negativity; keep your thoughts and actions positive. Psychologist David J. Pollay describes this well with his Law of the Garbage Truck, which he learned from an New York City cab driver.

> Many people are like garbage trucks. They run around full of garbage, full of frustration, full of anger, and full of disappointment. As their garbage piles up, they look for a place to dump it. And if you let them, they'll dump it on you. So, when someone wants to dump on you, don't take it personally. Just smile, wave, wish them well, and move on. Believe me. You'll be happier.

We all look at things through our own lens, shaped by our experiences, upbringing, education, environment, and other factors. A person's perception of other people and events is not necessarily reality. By understanding this, you can better comprehend why others think and act the way they do.

Summary

As the saying goes:

> Misery loves company

It's too easy to get sucked into the drama that comes with negativity. As a professional consultant, resist the temptation to argue with a pessimistic or disgruntled stakeholder. Act professionally at all time and do not join them in grumbling, ranting, complaining, or gossiping. It won't result in your anything positive, but rather affect your attitude throughout the engagement.