

## WORN OUT AT WORK?

Twelve Common Workplace Behaviors That Drain Everyone's Energy--and How to Purge Them in 2011

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Last year was a long, exhausting year at your workplace. You're tired, depleted, and quite frankly just done with "business as usual." You're laying the blame for your fatigue squarely at the feet of the increased responsibilities and long hours you've been facing, however, you might be wrong. Working hard—when done with a good attitude in the right environment—can actually be quite invigorating.

In other words, what's wearing you out at work might not be the work.

Most people wrongly assume that their tasks and responsibilities are what's grinding them down. However, while "work" is a convenient scapegoat, the real culprit is often the negativity of the people you work with and their constant complaining, and the pessimistic culture that is now the norm in a lot of workplaces.

The fact is, many of us work in a world of drainers. And what, exactly, is a drainer? The term can describe anyone in the workplace—a boss, coworker, employee, or client—who sucks the life and energy right out of you.

No one sets out to be a drainer, of course. It's just that some people regularly (and inadvertently) exhibit energy-draining behaviors. What's worse, many bosses allow them to continue—or are themselves guilty of practicing these behaviors. Moreover, over time, the entire culture becomes poisoned.

Don't fret, though: If managers are able to identify the offending behaviors and fix them, they'll be able to spend more time nourishing their companies' cultures—which will, in turn, make employees happier and more productive, thus increasing the bottom line.

In my new book, *Soup: A Recipe to Nourish Your Team and Culture*—written in a fun business fable format—I lay out the ingredients that make up a nourishing culture, instead of a draining one.

Read on for my top twelve draining behaviors (presented in a what-not-to-do format), as well as tips for how you can make a change for the better in each of these situations this New Year:

### 1. The Energy Vampire Attack

**DON'T:** Let negativity become your go-to response. There's nothing more draining than a boss or coworker who is constantly negative. I call these folks "energy vampires." They are never happy, rarely supportive, and constantly nay-saying any and all ideas and suggestions that aren't their own. According to them, you might as well give up before you start.

**DO:** Respond constructively when someone offers up an idea. Even if you know more about a particular project, have more experience than the rest of your team, or are positive that the suggestions others are making are off the mark, hear them out. Let employees and coworkers know that when they come to you with their ideas, they'll be heard with an open mind and received with respect. Insist that everyone else practice positivity as well. While negativity squelches creativity and initiative, an encouraging attitude will keep creative juices flowing and encourage constructive dialogue.

As pessimism rises, performance decreases. You have to encourage optimism and guard against pessimism, or your team will suffer.

### 2. The Out-of-Control Complain Train

**DON'T:** Give in to the temptation to whine. It's a well-known phenomenon that can have catastrophic consequences: One person's complaint resonates with someone else, who then proceeds to add grievances to the pile, which prompts yet another individual to throw in her two (negative) cents...and so on. Before you know it, everyone is complaining, and any work that gets done thereafter is marred by a bad attitude.

**DO:** Push for solutions. The next time a water-cooler conversation threatens to barrel out of control into Complaint

Central, step in and ask the complainers how they would make things better. Better yet, ban complaints altogether. It's tough love for sure—but it will also create and sustain a positive culture.

When you boil things down, complaints are just noise and nothing more—but each one does represent an opportunity to turn something negative into something positive. Turn your employees from problem-sharers to problem-solvers—it'll make an unbelievable difference in your office's atmosphere!

### **3. The Vicious Voicemail (or Email)**

**DON'T:** Leave critical or harsh messages on voicemail or send them to an email inbox. Nine times out of ten, these critiques seem much more vehement and condemnatory than they actually are. Plus, any communication you send via electronic methods can potentially last forever. Not only could your words come back to haunt you, they'll also be a constant reminder to your coworker or employee of his or her supposed shortcomings.

**DO:** Suck it up and conduct the tough talks in person. If you need to have a stern talk with someone, or if you need to talk through a conflict or problem, do it in person if at all possible. You'll be able to ensure that your words and tone aren't misinterpreted, and you'll be able to immediately have a constructive dialogue with the other person. By talking about ways to improve, you can end the conversation on a positive and encouraging note.

### **4. The Loaded Monday Morning Inbox**

**DON'T:** Overwhelm your team with a mountain of e-mails before the week is under way. If you're finishing up your own to-do list late on a Friday night, or if you're simply trying to get a jumpstart on the week ahead, it can be tempting to dish out the details and to-dos as you think of them. After all, if you wait 'til Monday morning, you might forget to tell those who need to know! However, coming in to an inbox of fifty-seven new messages is draining and makes folks feel like they're fighting an uphill battle from the start.

**DO:** Boil down and bundle your communication as considerately as possible. Inevitably, people are going to be working late and sending emails over the weekend—in today's business culture, it's unavoidable! However, there are a few things you can do to make "You've Got Mail!" less stressful and more efficient for the recipient. Be sure to flag any urgent e-mails so that your teammates know which tasks to tackle first—and include as many details as possible so that (1) you won't forget them, and (2) the recipient can get started as quickly as possible. If you can, combine as many of the tasks and questions as you can into one document.

One e-mail as opposed to ten separate ones is a lot less intimidating. However, if you do fire off a multitude of messages in a moment of panic, a quick note acknowledging the unusual volume can change everything!

### **5. The Busy Bee Bamboozle**

**DON'T:** Confuse activity with progress. You know the person. She's always soooo busy but doesn't ever seem to meet deadlines or get anything done. When teams are being formed, people secretly hope she isn't assigned to theirs. She's living proof of the fact that just because your day is full of things to do doesn't necessarily mean that you're getting them done.

**DO:** Set goals and hold yourself and your employees accountable for results. These results should be ones that matter and that are visible and valuable to your team. It can be helpful to transition over to a day-to-day plan that will help everyone stay on the right track. Most important, don't put your team in situations where the lines are blurred. If the goals are crystal clear, they'll be easier to accomplish.

### **6. The Low Performer Look-Away**

**DON'T:** Let subpar work slide. Simply put, low performers drag the rest of the team down. They are like a cancer inside your organization, creating resentment and generating more work for everyone else. Moreover, if you allow them to linger and thrive for too long, your best employees will move on to a more productive environment.

**DO:** Institute a zero-tolerance policy for low performers. Hold your entire team accountable for meeting their goals and adhering to the same performance standards. If one person consistently misses the bar, then you need to take swift action. Let your employees know that you value their hard work and that you will not allow others to do less and get away with it.

In support of this initiative, strive for complete transparency. When your team knows exactly what's expected, they'll know where they stand—and you'll be able to make sure that their fears, uncertainties, and questions aren't holding

them back.

## 7. The Unclear Communiqué

**DON'T:** Assume others have all the information they need, or that something you know isn't really all that important. These hastily drawn conclusions that result from chronic poor communication can lead to serious mistakes and major missed opportunities. Plus, lack of clarity is incredibly frustrating to those who must work with you. When employees, coworkers, or supervisors have to spend their time tracking you down for clarification, rather than getting the communication from you that they need, productivity falls and creativity is stifled.

**DO:** Make a concerted and proactive effort to make sure that the right people are in the know. Whether it's letting your boss know that a client's daughter is getting married (so he can call in congratulations) or telling a coworker that a vendor prefers to be contacted only via e-mail, be sure to tell the appropriate people. You'll set your entire team up for success and ensure that your clients get the service they deserve. Also, make sure you copy the right people on e-mails, promptly return voicemails, and are clear about directions and expectations. If you say you are going to do something, mean it.

A big part of a successful culture is having a relationship between employees and managers that is built on trust and collaboration. That can happen only if a clear line of communication is established so that inspiration, encouragement, empowerment, and coaching can take place.

## 8. The Disorganization Drag-Down

**DON'T:** Allow disorganization to impede productivity. If you're managing or leading a company, heading up a big project, or traveling nonstop, it's likely you've lost an e-mail, important paper, phone number, or pie chart or two (or three or four) in your day. You're busy, and that's understandable. Constant disorganization can drain your employees and coworkers if they always have to cover your tracks. It may not always be possible, and accidents do happen—but not being able to find the quarterly report for the third meeting in a row sets a bad example, and it depletes others of the energy they could be putting towards other, more productive work.

**DO:** Make a concerted effort to keep up with your tasks and responsibilities. If you can't immediately put your hands on something you need, don't automatically ask others for help. Take a few minutes to try and find what you need on your own. Better yet, try to think of better systems and processes than the ones you're using (or not using) now. If you see that someone in your office has a particular knack for organization, ask her for some tips to help you out.

Remember that there's no substitute for communication when you do drop the ball. Tell your employees that between travel, a jam-packed schedule, and working between two computers and a smartphone, you've lost something you shouldn't have. If you are humble and honest about it, they'll be more sympathetic to your plight and more likely to jump in and help you keep things organized!

## 9. The Hasty Plate Clear-Off

**DON'T:** Sacrifice quality on the altar of expediency. There's a lot of work to do, and you (understandably) want to get your own tasks done so you don't hold up others. However, moving through assignments quickly in order to get them off your own plate can also mean that you're piling the work on someone else. If you've rushed, you're more likely to have made mistakes and been sloppy, which isn't fair to the person who gets the assignment after you.

**DO:** Take the time you need to do the job right. Rather than rushing through a report or clicking "send" just because it's 5:00 p.m., get focused and make sure you do your best work the first time. Pay attention to details, check over your work, and make sure you've followed the proper guidelines. Your coworkers and employees would rather have a project that's done right than one that's ahead of schedule. (If you have to turn in a project a day late on occasion, it's not the end of the world.)

Doing your best work sets the rest of your team up for success. When people realize that you're this kind of teammate, they'll take on your projects with confidence and energy.

## 10. The Chronic Deadline Dodge

**DON'T:** Allow unmet deadlines to throw everything and everyone off-track. With all the unexpected obstacles you face in a workday, it's not always easy to meet deadlines. And yes, sometimes it's impossible—but those times should be few and far between. When people chronically miss deadlines, it's a sure sign of a cultural issue. Either people aren't giving it their all—or they're truly overburdened. Either way, your company's productivity will suffer.

**DO:** Set reasonable, clear deadlines for everyone involved (and hold them accountable). Once something gets off-track, nobody is willing to own it. Make sure you set reasonable deadlines that you and your teammates can meet in order to avoid setting folks up for failure. Even if it takes some extra elbow grease from time to time, make a conscious effort to meet every deadline every time (and hold your team accountable for meeting them, too!).

### 11. The Unattainable Atta-Boy (or Atta-Girl!)

**DON'T:** Get so caught up in what's coming down the pike that you forget to acknowledge what's happening now. Most managers and business leaders would agree that they feel a lot of pressure. It can be hard for them to constantly be the ones catching the heat from the higher-ups while the rest of the employees have only their own goals to meet and worry about. However, when responsibilities give you to-do tunnel vision and cause you to skimp on the "job well done," employees can get discouraged in a hurry—especially if you immediately ask about another goal that's gone unmet or push more work at them to try and make up for losses in other areas.

**DO:** Express appreciation and admiration when appropriate. Employees don't need a pat on the back and a round of applause at every turn. What they do need is to know that you can be satisfied. If, like a hamster running in a wheel, an employee feels as though no amount of hard work or hours spent will ever garner the boss's approval or satisfaction, his energy and self-motivation will be zapped.

Leadership is not so much about what you do. It's about what you can inspire, encourage, empower, and coach others to do. If employees know you can be pleased and that goals can be reached, then they will happily work toward those things.

### 12. The Blame Game

**DON'T:** Point fingers at others in order to take the heat off of yourself. A mistake is made, the boss is mad, a deadline is missed. If all eyes are on your team and you start pointing fingers, you could be making a huge mistake. If your employees or your coworkers don't think you shoulder your share of the blame or are unapproachable when it comes to constructive criticism, they'll start to shut down toward you.

**DO:** Accept responsibility for your actions gracefully and humbly. Nobody likes to be the one at fault, however, owning up to your mistakes and learning from them are big parts of working together and being successful. If you make a mistake, be the first to own up to it and try to do things differently in the future. Also, be open to suggestions and criticisms—they may make the going much smoother!

If some of these behaviors sound all too familiar, don't despair. The cusp between the year that's just passed and the one that's just come is the perfect time to take stock of what's making your culture less than nourishing—and resolve to make it better.

It's important for managers to acknowledge that it's been a tough twelve months and that you understand why folks are feeling drained and depleted. Above all, tell them that you are willing and eager to help alleviate some of that stress! A little acknowledgment can go a long way toward a brighter, more productive, and much more energized 2011.

## About the Author(s)

**Jon Gordon** is a consultant, keynote speaker, and the international best-selling author of *Soup*, *The Energy Bus*, *The No Complaining Rule*, and *Training Camp*, all from Wiley. He and his books have been featured on CNN and on NBC's Today show, as well as in *Forbes*, *Fast Company*, *O, The Oprah Magazine*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The New York Times*. For more information: [www.JonGordon.com](http://www.JonGordon.com) and [www.Soup11.com](http://www.Soup11.com).