

NEELOY ROY CHOWDHURY

# BET YOU WON'T READ THIS



FOREWORD BY  
**Shiv Shivakumar**

EMBRACE NEGATIVE  
TO BE POSITIVE





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**Foreword:**

**SHIV SHIVAKUMAR**

# Negativity As Positivity: Handling The Oxymoron

**I** am sure everyone agrees that being positive is a virtue and junior managers and middle managers are urged to have a positive mental attitude in order to get noticed and progress. Being only positive leads to a rah-rah culture and blindsides people in facing reality. I am happy that Neeloy has put together a nice set of thoughts and arguments on why being negative is helpful.

Many airline accidents happen because the co-pilot did not signal the negative aspect of the pilot's decisions. The Alliance Air Mangalore accident happened because the pilot was coming in too fast and overshot the runway. The co-pilot signaled but didn't push the pilot to go around.

The same happened with a Korean airlines flight near New York when the co-pilot didn't have the courage to challenge the pilot and people lost their lives.

This behaviour of not challenging hierarchy is a factor in all hi power index cultures. When lives are at stake, then it is crucial to speak up even if perceived as being negative. I think it is mandatory for the concerned people to paint the negative side of the decisions being taken, they owe it to themselves and also to the people who have reposed their trust in their intellectual honesty.

I have seen the same behaviour in meetings. The category heads in Hindustan Unilever didn't agree with the power brands strategy of the early 2000s but no one stood up and challenged the assumptions publicly. In private, they would all say that it was doomed to fail and fail it did spectacularly. The company lost a few years pursuing the wrong strategy. The company went back to the old strategy after a few lost years pursuing the failed power brands strategy.

Years later, the same thing happened in Nokia when Nokia chose windows ahead of the android ecosystem. No one wanted to tell the CEO and the Board the truth, anyone who dared to tell the truth was branded as being unfaithful to the new strategy. Nokia lost precious time and never came back to its glory days.

Most people are scared to signal a negative point of view for fear of being ridiculed, laughed at and ostracised by the system. The people who do have the courage should be appreciated and

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celebrated. This is the job of leaders to provide that safe environment where negative points are out at the table for a healthy debate.

We should stop telling people ‘don’t be part of the problem, be part of the solution’. However, we need to be clear that an overdose of negativity has to be curtailed since we will never make progress. An overdose of negativity leads to cynicism which is simply stated ‘why it won’t work, and nothing can save this, a kind of doomsday situation’.

There are times when negativity can unite a team, this is true in sports and underdogs use this negative energy to beat their fancied opponents. They build the negative hype in the locker room or media to create a winning edge and mentality. So some mind games are seen as negative but they do work.

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I would say playing devil’s advocate is actually good. I always encouraged my team to challenge the assumptions and plans before we finally agreed to committing precious

time and resources to the plan. I think a devil’s advocate helps the company, a negative challenge helps set boundaries on how far we can push the issue. If the negative question was – what will tell us that our strategy is failing, then that will help focus the team on identifying potential measures, and that’s helpful.

Sometimes people could be seen as negative if they stick to a principle. Many people are opposing the stimulus package of President Biden saying that the country is moving to socialism and will be burdened with debt. At a

principle level, this could be right, however, when one is staring at high unemployment, a shrinking economy, then one has to be pragmatic. President Obama was pragmatic in the face of rightful negative arguments on the auto industry bail out.

History has shown Obama to be right. I have found that people who are negative have the courage to question the positive, accepted spin machine. It is tough to ask the what if questions. Did the kid who said the emperor had no clothes was helping the king or ridiculing him? This simple courage is misunderstood as foolhardy courage and lack of organisational dynamics. I disagree with that view.

The World Economic Forum has said that most jobs are at risk in the future and individuals need to develop three skills in order to face the future. The three skills are: Critical Thinking, Creativity and Complex problem solving. All three need to put the negative of the concerned issue at the table if you want to frame it for success.



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