EXCLUSIVE SURVEY RESULTS:

—*Positively Powerful*—
Women Leaders
Talk
Workplace Negativity

PROGRESSIVE
WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

EXCLUSIVE SURVEY RESULTS:
Positively Powerful! Women Leaders Talk Workplace Negativity

How do you deal with workplace negativity?

That's the question we asked women leaders in our recent online survey, and were impressed with how they've been able to handle negative situations at work in very positive ways. Many have developed a myriad of strategies for dealing with it on an ongoing basis.

While women leaders find themselves having to deal with negative situations – from not feeling they're being recognized enough by upper management to being overloaded with work – most conflicts at work have to do with personality conflicts with co-workers.

Unique strategies that turn a negative into a positive

Most women leaders have developed their own unique strategies that have helped to turn things around for them and their team members. Take a look at their very candid responses to our questions below. You'll find some useful information here that you can implement whenever you find yourself embroiled in any workplace negativity.

Question #1: What is the cause of your workplace negativity?

Is being a woman in the workplace a cause of distress for women leaders? Even though women hold such a low percentage of top leadership spots compared to men, **only 15% labeled gender discrimination as the cause of their workplace distress**. Here is what is causing their workplace conflict:

Personality conflicts with co-workers ("peers not pulling their weight")	**53**%
Inadequate job performance recognition	**44**%
Work overload	**41**%
Workplace bully/harassment	**36**%
Conflicts with top management*	**31**%
Pay inequity	**29**%

*("selfish leadership, lack of accountability, power trips"; "conflicting guidance from leadership team on how to manage my program"; "lack of communication from top management")

Working it Out: While It Surrounds You

Other causes of workplace negativity included age discrimination, poor management, union issues and persistent lawsuits, as well as a variety of unique situations with staff and management:

- *"Most staff do not want to complete their responsibilities; will do anything to shortcut or not do the work; favoritism; inability of upper management to discipline staff."*

- *"I have one employee who is very talented but does not consider how his decisions affect other staff members. When things do not go his way, he threatens to quit. The last time this happened, I told him that next time, I would take him at his word. Instead of threatening, he tendered his resignation with the expectation that upper management would ask him to stay. They did not, and I will be replacing him with someone who is a much better team player."*

Question #2: Is the workplace negativity within your power to change?

"Replacing and hiring is within my power," said one women leader, "however, we had a significant staff turnover due to larger economic changes in the state."

So sometimes the negativity is bigger than the workplace itself. That's when many respondents start looking for innovative solutions, like employee personality tests or even a conflict coach. A small percentage were forced to resign, but most use the opportunity to learn from it and stretch their potential.

For the most part, the workplace negativity was not within the respondents' power to change:

NO: **75**%	YES: **25**%

Working it Out: Controlling the Chaos

"You can't change others," said one respondent. "You can only change what you can control, which is how you react or deal with others." And that seems to be the theme in this survey – being a calm influence on their team in the midst of chaos.

> *"Yes and no. I can make efforts to understand personality differences, but I cannot force someone to provide clear direction or goals. And I cannot help it when people routinely change the scope, once they finally set it."*

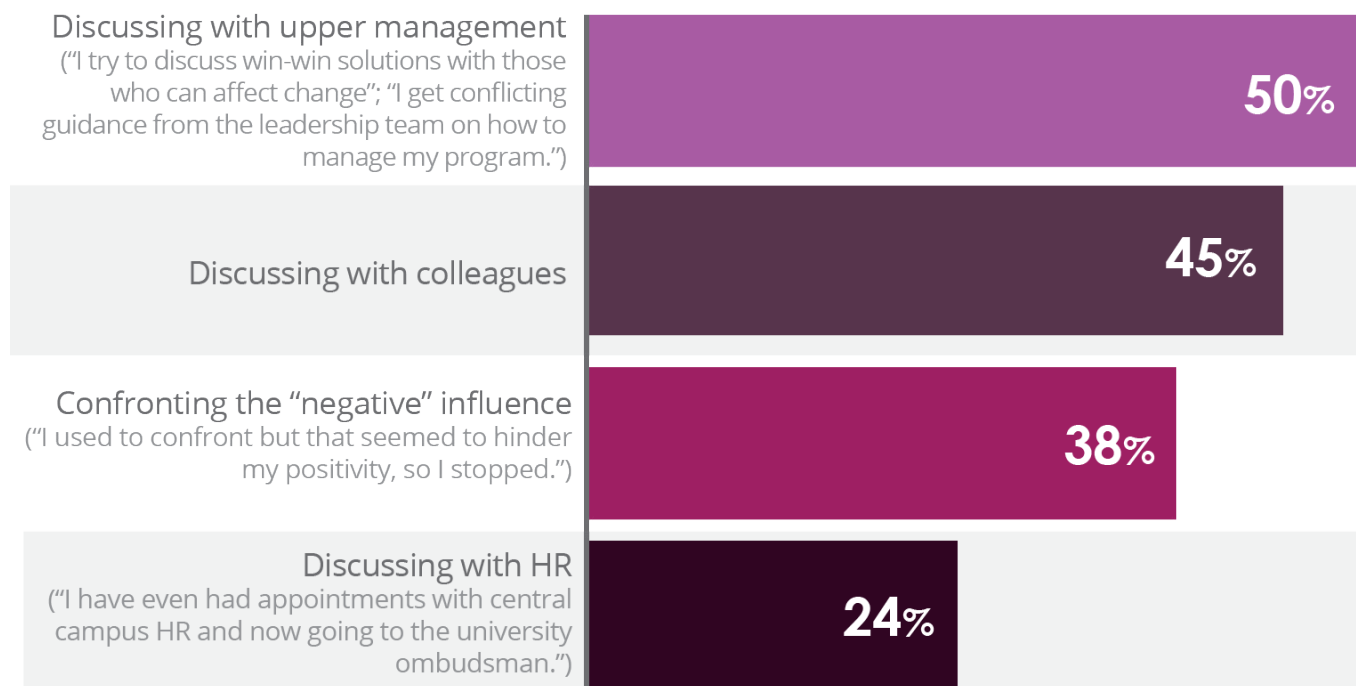> *"I've been able to remove a couple of people who are negatively impacting the department; now I am dealing with not enough staff and overworked employees."*

> *"When it impacts performance, I have made specific job assignment changes, moved offices of staff and given them performance improvement plans. Working through progress now..."*

Question #3: How are you handling the workplace negativity?

"Bringing positivity to my sphere of influence," is how one respondent answered this question. "Seeking to help people understand each other by sharing insights." And that was a typical response. Most women examine their own communication style, while confronting the negative influences, and look to higher-ups and colleagues for advice.

For the most part, the respondents were handling the negativity by having discussions with higher-ups, colleagues and co-workers:

Discussing with upper management
("I try to discuss win-win solutions with those who can affect change"; "I get conflicting guidance from the leadership team on how to manage my program.")
50%

Discussing with colleagues
45%

Confronting the "negative" influence
("I used to confront but that seemed to hinder my positivity, so I stopped.")
38%

Discussing with HR
("I have even had appointments with central campus HR and now going to the university ombudsman.")
24%

Working it Out: Constantly Seeking Solutions

Aside from one woman who said she was "trying to remain neutral," the majority of respondents do what is within their power to keep a negative situation from getting worse.

"I'm constantly evaluating my own communication style to make sure that I'm not a part of the problem."

"Often upper management doesn't see what the majority of the employees see...There is a trust issue of employees who will only say so much even when the morale of the department has dropped tremendously."

"Previously, I have been able to coach employees and work with them to channel their negativity or talk through problems causing it. This particular employee has not been receptive to any interventions."

Question #4: How much is the workplace negativity affecting your ability to perform your job duties?

For the most part, our respondents are still able to be effective leaders, even though negativity is swirling around them:

Being an effective leader overall ('It distracts me [the CEO] from working on what I should be working on, so that I can address complaints and issues with staff.")	**29%**
Decision making	**24%**
Communicating	**23%**
Motivating your team	**22%**
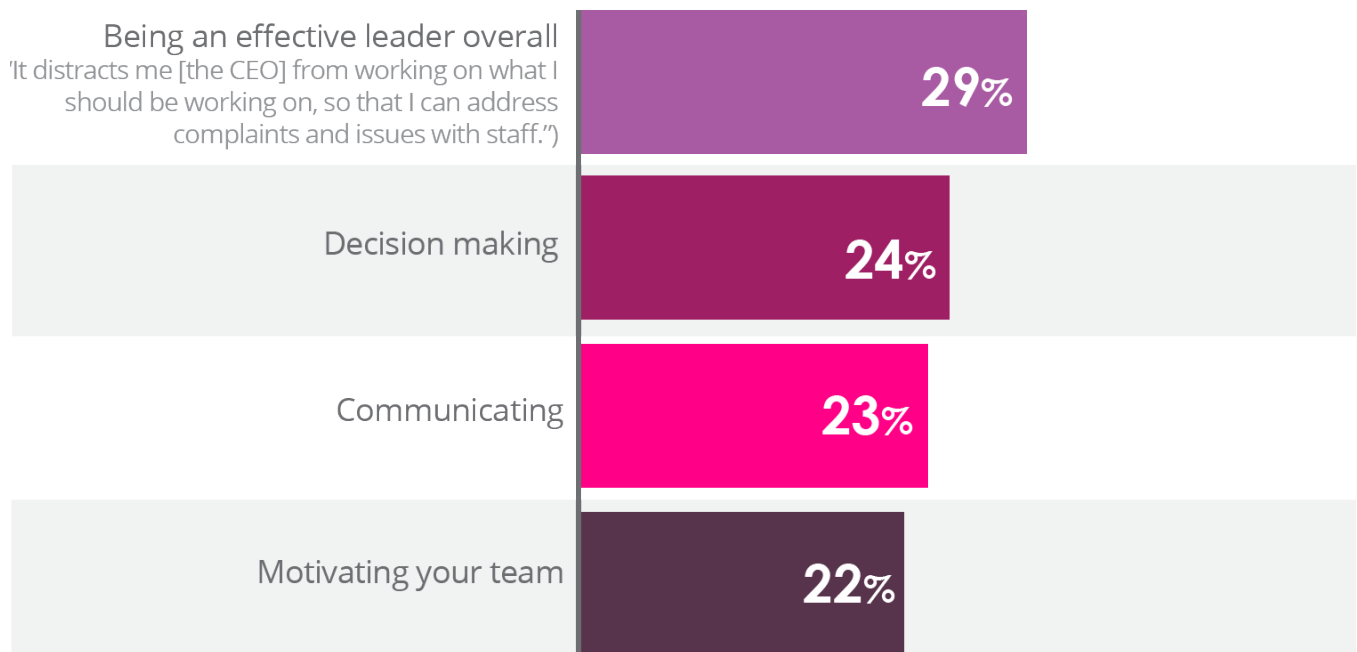
Working it Out: Under Pressure

Grace under pressure describes how most respondents cope, perhaps laying the groundwork for when they move up to even higher positions that require them to be an even more calming presence in the face of adversity.
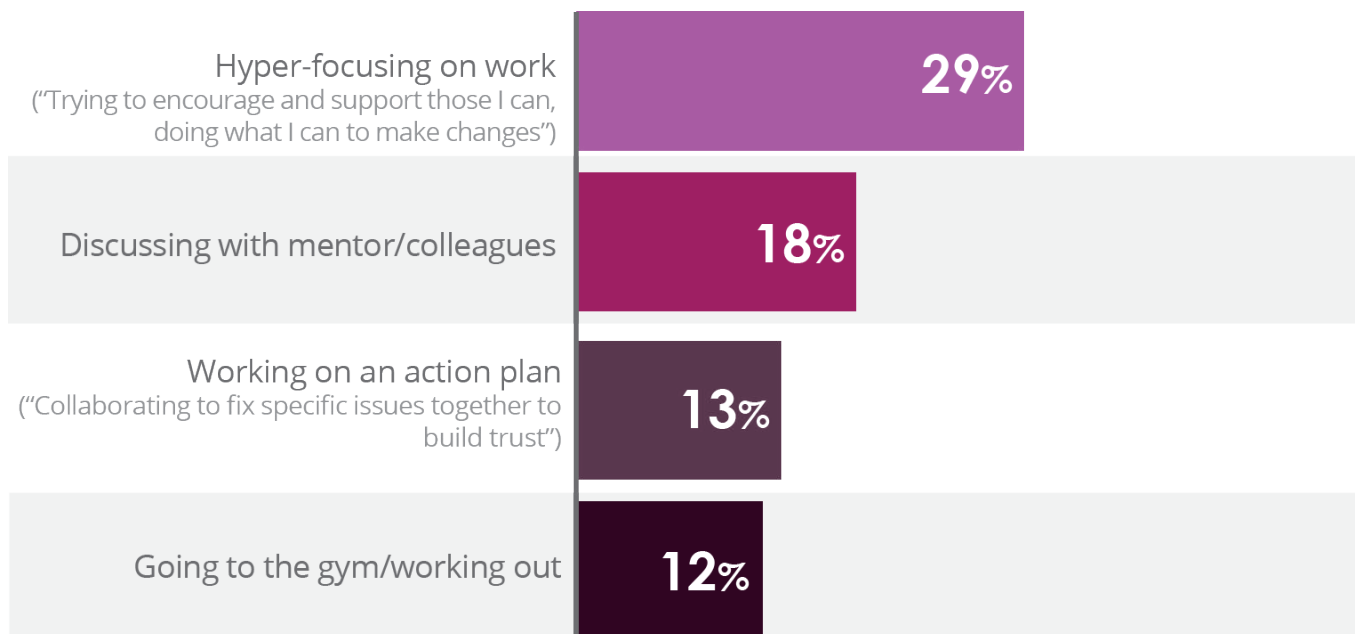
> *"I give positive speeches, always encouraging, and come in to work with a positive attitude."*

> *"I'm always asking myself what could I have done differently to make it a better outcome with excellent service, always putting the client first."*

> *"I'm trying to focus on what I have influence over, doing my best at my job, and trying to encourage and support those I can, trying to calm down some of the negative feelings by helping people understand where others are coming from, doing what I can to make changes."*

Question #5: What has helped you deal with the workplace negativity on a daily basis?

Since most of the women we surveyed have been dealing with workplace negativity for more than six months, they have developed effective coping methods out of necessity and out of a sense of loyalty to their company. Perhaps realizing how detrimental even one negative comment on social media can be to a company, most leaders realize the importance of being focused – and keeping their team focused on the work:

Hyper-focusing on work
("Trying to encourage and support those I can, doing what I can to make changes") — **29%**

Discussing with mentor/colleagues — **18%**

Working on an action plan
("Collaborating to fix specific issues together to build trust") — **13%**

Going to the gym/working out — **12%**

Working it Out: Daily Strategies for Staying Positive

How do you get through the day when there's a negative influence afoot? We asked women leaders what self-focused strategies help them to stay focused when things get especially tense in the workplace:

"I work on self-improvement, behavioral analysis, self-help programs, and leadership and management development."

"I keep a lot of positive inspirational messages on my door before I leave for work."

"Open communication among staff."

"Redirecting conversations to different topics."

"5-minutes breaks, walking around."

"I walk on my lunch hour, when I take one."

"Closing my door for a 2-minute meditation helps re-center my energy and gives me a fresh, positive outlook."

"Managing my own stress – talking to others, leaving the issues behind when I go home, relaxation techniques like deep breathing and music, spending time with my pet."

"A range of strategies, including discussing with colleagues and coach, working on an action plan, raising awareness, working on self-improvement, doing research on leadership and management, working externally on different projects."
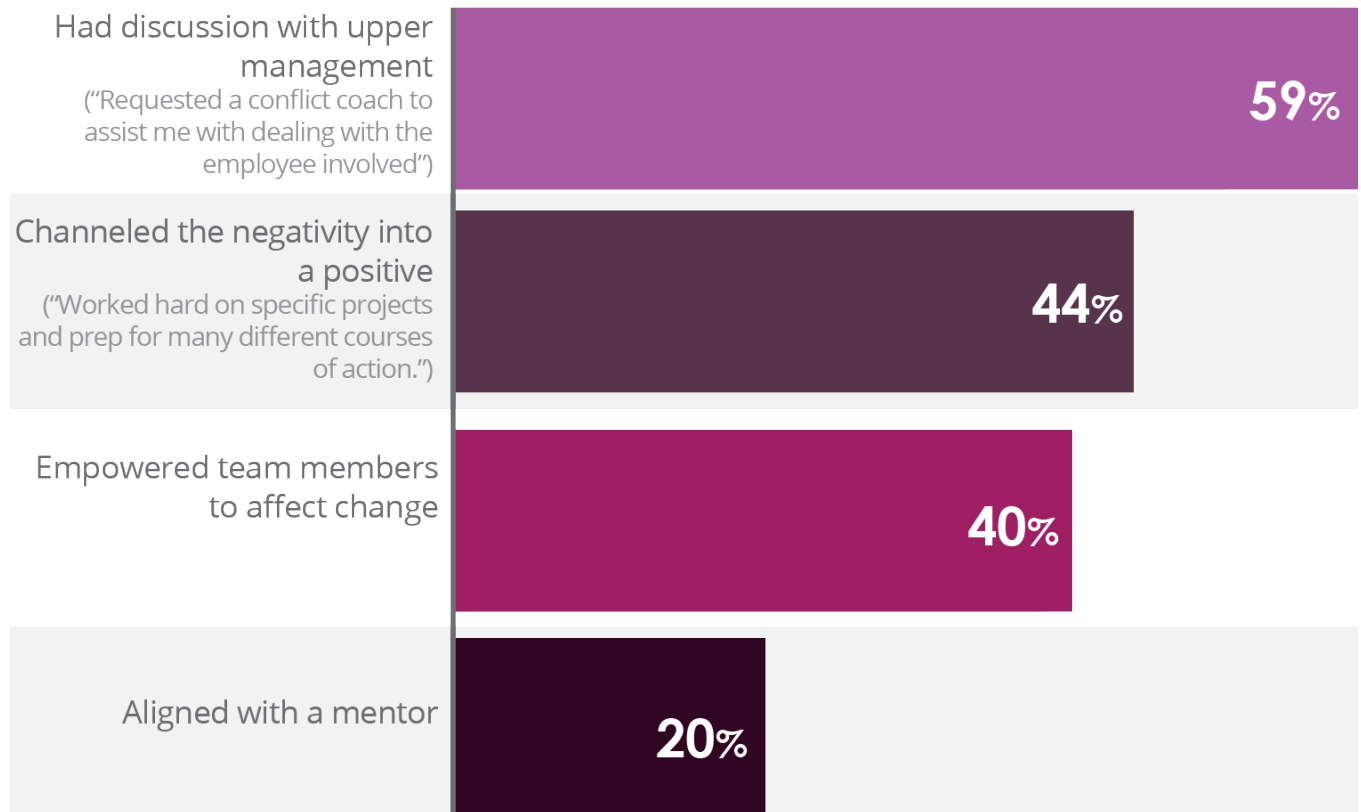
"Prayer."

"Taking some power back by updating resume, job search, maybe an interview or two, or just taking a few mental health days to remove myself from the situation."

"Redirecting conversations to different topics."

Question #6: What have you done to handle workplace negativity in a positive way?

In the midst of a negative workplace, one respondent said she's prepped for "many different courses of action," while others deal directly with top management for solutions. Some turned the situation into a positive on a personal level, by renegotiating their contracts.

Had discussion with upper management
("Requested a conflict coach to assist me with dealing with the employee involved")
59%

Channeled the negativity into a positive
("Worked hard on specific projects and prep for many different courses of action.")
44%

Empowered team members to affect change
40%

Aligned with a mentor
20%

Working it Out: Turning a Negative into a Positive

For the most part, women in leadership roles have an almost innate ability to switch negatives into positive, since they know that others will be looking to them for answers, for solutions, for leadership. And they need to deliver.

"Decided that it's not worth insanity – focusing on the positive."

"I have the gift of encouragement and the ability to bring a calming spirit to a hostile situation, partly because of longevity, trust of employees, and positive relationships with diverse cultures and ethnicities."

"I try to stay as positive as I can and understand where people are coming from. I look for the source of bad behavior and negativity (e.g., if someone is speaking angrily, I can often figure out what's really behind it — usually it's fear, so I try to understand where that person is coming from). This is really helpful when I can share that insight with others because while it doesn't solve the source of the problem, it can help to reduce some of the tension and negative feelings. I give a listening ear, try not to say anything too harsh even if I'm speaking hard truths, and always try to be honest and objective."

Strategies for Turning Negatives into Positives

We received enormously helpful strategies for handling negative situations and have tried to include the best of them here, from just keeping a positive attitude to using management tools that can be effective in conflict resolution.

Handling Your Team

Amidst conflict at work, many women leaders have tried to continually motivate their team:

> *"I always encourage team members to look at the negative situations from a different viewpoint with a positive solution in mind."*

> *"Encourage team and others to be the best they can be."*

> *"I hold monthly review meetings with team members to allow them to raise concerns."*

Tools for Change

Some respondents mentioned specific management tools that have helped to deal with negativity. Could some of these work for you?

DISC assessment test: This personality test, which is given to employees, helps with team building and conflict resolution. The DISC test, which is based on Dominance, Influence, Steadiness and Compliance, helps build more effective working relationships. "We used the assessment tools to strengthen our communication and help facilitate greater understanding about what others need from us," said one respondent. Another said: "Once our team got in a room and took the DISC assessment training, we began to have a better understanding of where people are coming from and how they prefer to give and receive information. We've all been more mindful of each other's preferences as we have had to work together to overcome a huge obstacle (boss out on long-term disability)."

Waterline model: This diagnostic tool identifies four aspects of team and organizational life that might be the source of your conflict: Structure; Process and Patterns; Interpersonal Issues (between two employees); and Intrapersonal issues (one individual). "We used it to discover the real root cause of my negativity (other than personality conflict), and once I realized the real reason, I could tell in what way I had the power to change the situation," says one respondent.

The Power of Positivity

An overwhelming number of women leaders recognize their role within a negative environment: To keep a positive outlook day in, day out, perhaps realizing that negativity is like a disease – best to stomp it out with positivity before it spreads among the team. So they make a conscious effort to combat the negativity, as evidenced from their responses:

> *"I bring positivity to my sphere of influence, seeking to help people understand each other by sharing insights."*

> *"I used to confront but that seemed to hinder my positivity so I stopped. It was more important that I continue to be positive and do the right things regardless. This in and of itself has helped tremendously!"*

> *"The best approach for me is to focus on what I can control and change. Remember that this too shall pass. A positive outlook helps no matter what the circumstance."*

> *"Stay positive. When one co-worker constantly talks about something negative, I counter it with something positive. And when my supervisor changes the scope of a project on me (again), I remind him that I was working under different assumptions. I make an effort not to take it personally - I cannot read minds."*

> *"I try to be positive in every situation and portray a positive attitude, even if I'm not happy with the situation. "*

Workplace negativity may hide sometimes, but it doesn't go away — and that's what women in leadership roles realize rather quickly. They've learned how to channel the negativity in new directions or contain the negativity while trying to find solutions. And that's the challenge – to find a way to lead no matter what the circumstances.

You can discover more ways to recognize and counter workplace negativity, as well as develop other leadership skills, through Progressive Women's Leadership.

Please visit us at
www.progressivewomensleadership.com
for live events, podcasts and more information about Progressive Women's Leadership.

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