There is a difference between getting involved in an employee’s personal problems and being supportive. A supervisor does not have to behave in a detached and aloof manner to keep from getting involved with the employee’s issues. The challenge comes when a personal problem appears simple or understandable to the supervisor. It is then tempting to offer advice, despite unknown dimensions to the problem that might exist. The other part of this challenge comes from employees who want the supervisor involved in their problems. These employees want a different
Employees teased another worker about drinking large soda drinks. The employee was clearly not happy about it. I thought about speaking up, but figured it was okay for them to continue because the issue of large soda drinks is so prevalent in the news.

If you are unaware of the costs associated with workplace negativity or what strategies can address it, you are more likely to ignore it, tolerate it, or even worse, join in. Workplace negativity isn’t just about employees griping or picking on each other or what’s overheard in the restroom. Workplace negativity damages the work culture, and a deliberate approach is often needed to reverse it. Your primary tool for fighting negativity is communication. Intervening may not be easy, but the trick is to not give up. For example, you may be unable to stop layoffs, but you may be able to facilitate support systems, improved communication, and quicker responses to un-founded rumors. Talk to the EAO, and be open-minded if asked about your supervision style; perhaps it contributes unwittingly to workplace negativity. Examining all angles is important. Strategies will vary depending on the issues, but once you decide upon an approach, be sure to establish a process that helps you prevent the return to a negative work culture.

Whether news exists about the harmful effects of smoking, large fountain drinks, red meat, or tanning beds, it is important as a supervisor to remain focused on maintaining respectful behavior in the workplace. The intensity of media attention to topical issues can make it seem “okay” to criticize others or treat them with less respect. Harassment in the workplace has a broad definition, and it takes the passive approval of only one authority figure to encourage some employees who may have kept silent to join in on treating others with disrespect. Most supervisors underestimate their level of influence with their employees. Realize that stepping in to correct this behavior may be welcomed. This is because many employees who behave disrespectfully also have second thoughts about it, even as they are participating. Your visible disapproval and corrective action as an authority figure can be powerful – not only for stopping disrespectful behavior but for reinforcing the importance of maintaining a positive and affirming workplace.