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New Managers: 5 Ways To Stop Negative Office Gossip

Being a new manager can be tough because it often includes stepping into situations that are outside your comfort zone, such as handling negative office gossip. Dealing directly and swiftly with the perpetrators, meeting with your staff and encouraging positive gossip (not the negative kind) can help turn things around.



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As a new manager, it's your job to ensure the department achieves all of its goals and objectives. This can be difficult to do if you're stepping into a situation where workplace gossiping has been allowed to run rampant. The good news: Being new to your managerial role is the best time to get to the bottom of what's going on and then put a stop to it.

Why Negative Gossip is Harmful

Negative gossip can create productivity issues (because employees feel the need to engage in CYA behavior), morale issues (because employees come to distrust each other and the management team), employee engagement and turnover issues (because high-performing employees will look for jobs elsewhere), even liability issues when pervasive gossip is deemed "malicious harassment."

How To Stop Negative Office Gossip

Tip #1 – Address the specific perpetrators. Your first action should be to stop negative gossip on a personal level by directly addressing the key gossipers one-on-one. Do this in a confidential location and not where others can overhear the discussion, such as a conference room with a door you can shut. Your goal is to help the person understand the impact of their behavior and the consequences of what will happen if their bad behavior continues (such as a written warning that will go into their personnel file, demotion, loss of job, etc.).

Tip #2 – Meet with your entire team. After addressing the specific perpetrators individually, the next step is to discuss the situation with your entire team. This can be done by including

“gossip” as a topic for discussion in a staff meeting and helping the team understand the differences between negative gossip and positive gossip and the ramifications of each. Then, work with your team to change the department culture to one that encourages positive gossip.

Tip #3 – Encourage positive gossip. Positive gossip can actually be good for companies and employees. This is when managers and employees share positive stories. An example is a medical device company communicating personal stories of the lives saved by the automated external defibrillator the company makes – which can help employees feel proud of where they work, thus improving morale and helping reduce turnover. Positive gossip can also be about individual employees, such as sharing actions where employees went out of their way to help a customer or communicating (department-wide or even company-wide) when an employee comes up with a phenomenal product or product improvement idea that results in a patent. Take time at every staff meeting to share positive gossip stories to encourage positive behavior.

Tip #4 – Model the behavior you want to see. As a new manager, if you previously gossiped in the break room with others, that behavior must stop. Employees will look to you for what behaviors are acceptable and unacceptable, and you need to ensure you are “walking the talk” at all times and leading by example. Changing yours and others’ bad habits isn’t easy, but once you do so you may just find that your department becomes the role model for other departments throughout the company.

Tip #5 – this one is a “Don’t.” Something I *don’t* encourage is trying to stop negative office gossip at an all-employee level, such as by sending out an email blast to all employees that “office gossip won’t be tolerated” or trying to address the issue during an all company meeting. Doing so generally isn’t effective because it fails to address the specific offenders – and often causes good employees to shake their heads and wonder why the management team is conflict averse. Instead, provide managers with training on dealing with conflict and encourage all managers to address negative gossipers immediately and directly.

Bottom Line: Allowing negative workplace gossip to flourish can lead to a culture of distrust and negatively impact productivity, morale, engagement and turnover – not to mention increase the company’s legal liability. New managers should act quickly – unless stopped, pervasive negative gossip can be like a disease that spreads, wreaking havoc throughout a department (and even throughout a company).

~ Lisa Quast

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