

HR Insights

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Preventing Workplace Gossip During a Crisis

Gossip is a reality in many workplaces and, when not adequately addressed, can impact company culture and employee morale. During a crisis, such as the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, employee relations can be challenging for employers. Leaders strive to maintain positive employee morale while addressing current realities.

Employees know that a crisis can cause disruption—and want to be aware of both the current and future impact that a crisis has on their work environment. Should leaders fail to address their concerns, gossip can begin to serve as a source for employees seeking up-to-date information. However, leaders can take steps to prevent gossip, and when necessary, address why it is happening in their workplace.

This article addresses why gossip happens, the impact it can bring to a workplace, and how leaders can prevent and address it when necessary.

Why Gossip Occurs

A study by Gallup in 2019 found that only 13% of employees strongly agree that leadership at their organization is effective at communicating. While effective communication can address concerns directly, if employees aren't getting the answers they are looking for from leadership, they may start to speculate, openly discuss their thoughts elsewhere and look for answers.

Notably, employees are concerned about how a crisis will impact them directly. These impacts can include:

- What changes will take place at their workplace
- The potential for layoffs or furloughs, if any
- If and how long work-from-home measures will be in place
- How a crisis will impact their rewards, including both compensation and benefits

Ultimately, employees want to know how workplace changes will impact them. Should employees feel impactful topics aren't being addressed, gossip could be at risk of occurring and may impact a work environment.

The Impact of Gossip

Many organizations take pride in their company culture. A strong company culture can help with efforts such as productivity, retention and recruiting—which can have a substantial impact on the bottom line of an organization. But when employees feel that their leadership isn't communicating transparently, that strong culture may be at risk.

Gossip can influence company culture, as well as employee morale. Ideally, employees are focused on making contributions, rather than worrying about broader changes that are out of their control. Unfortunately, if rumors about furloughs, layoffs and

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other events are inaccurately spread, many employees may become worried beyond necessity. Ultimately, gossip can damage positive employee morale and lead to employees feeling insecure.

Preventing Workplace Gossip

Employers may find that they can prevent gossip through thoughtful and proactive employee relations. Effective communications can help address concerns, reducing the need for employees to spread—or listen to—rumors and gossip.

Addressing Employee Concerns Transparently

During a crisis, leaders are often required to address challenging topics. Layoffs, furloughs and many topics within employee relations aren't easy to address—but employers can mitigate the possibility of gossip spreading by communicating thoughtfully, transparently and in a timely manner.

While organizations desire positive employee morale, positive messaging can be overblown. If messaging is overtly positive but lacks substance, this may turn off some employees. If communication efforts don't reflect and acknowledge the day-to-day challenges that employees deal with, these efforts may seem off-putting to some employees. In contrast, if employee relations are transparent, timely and honest, employees will appreciate the sincerity and, most importantly, feel that this messaging is accurate.

Communicating Effectively

To communicate effectively, employers can start by ensuring that critical information is going out through channels that are reaching all employees. Many organizations have a mix of both on-site and remote workers, so consider how communication efforts can address all employees accordingly. Make sure that company updates are going out in a standardized way—and that all employees have easy access. Consider how email, company intranets and other channels can be used—rather than assuming the correct information will spread via word-of-mouth. A standardized approach or a multichannel effort can help ensure that employees know what information is essential, and where they can get it. However, employers who over-communicate may find that some messaging gets drowned out in the noise.

That's why it's essential to prioritize information that will most directly impact employees.

Employers can also consider discussing pressing topics directly with employees while allowing them to ask questions. Back-and-forth dialogue will allow employees to feel like they are up to date. Whether sharing information broadly with employees in a large town-hall environment or during team meetings, collaborative discussions can go a long way. Topics might include:

- How the organization is adapting and what this means for teams and individuals
- How leadership is making tough decisions
- Anticipated changes
- The potential impact on compensation and benefits

Every workplace is unique, and employers should consider what communication channels are appropriate for their organization.

Equipping Managers to Succeed

Managers can be on the front lines of addressing gossip and rumors, and can help directly address concerns that employees have. However, if managers aren't aware of the status of events within their organization, it can be challenging for them to offer appropriate support to their teams and employees. Sometimes, even bad news is better than no news, and if managers are equipped with the authority—and importantly, current knowledge—to address their teams, they can be an open resource for employees to turn to, rather than the rumor mill.

Leaders can also consider training managers and ensuring that they are ready to have difficult conversations with their employees. Managers can address current topics in meetings or directly with employees in a one-on-one setting. By opening dialogue between managers and employees, employers may find that this can help mitigate both the occurrence and impact of gossip.

Setting Expectations for Employees

Employers should ensure that employees are aware of what the expectations are for discussing pressing topics openly, and can even address gossip in an employee handbook and policies. For example, should an employee have a question or concern, it may be advisable that they contact a designated leader or their manager, rather than discuss sensitive issues with their peers.

Employers should be aware that laws related to employee expression vary by locality, and before implementing or changing workplace policies, employers should seek legal advice from local legal counsel.

Consider Why Gossip Is Occurring

Ideally, leaders can prevent gossip with proactive measures, but this isn't always the case. Employers can prepare to address an issue should it become prevalent. Gossip can often be a symptom of an underlying issue at hand. Organizations can review why gossip may be happening by reviewing their employee relations efforts. Topics to consider might include:

- Has your organization failed to communicate transparently?
- Are communications efforts reaching all employees?
- Do employees feel comfortable discussing sensitive topics with their managers?

There might not be an easy answer, but employers should thoughtfully consider why gossip is occurring, and whether it is preventable. Gossip isn't easy to address—but, should it happen, identifying the cause can be the first step to finding a solution. Employers can focus on learning why the gossip is taking place and begin to determine and, ideally, take measures to avoid gossip in the future.

Addressing Workplace Gossip

Unfortunately, some employers may find that gossip is hard to avoid altogether. Should gossip occur, employers can take steps to establish a process for addressing these rumors and help mitigate the presence of gossip in the future.

When gossip does occur, a standard process can help mitigate the spread of sensitive topics. By outlining a defined process, employees will know where to go should they hear something that makes them uncomfortable. If appropriate, leaders can refer employees to contact a specific resource, such as:

- A specific company leader
- An employee's manager
- A phone number or hotline
- An online resource

Ideally, this is the action taken, rather than employees turning to their peers to openly discuss sensitive issues.

When necessary, employers can consider thoughtfully addressing these current topics through employee relations. Issues that lead to gossip are often sensitive, so employers should evaluate how to best handle the situation, and address the concerns of employees. Every organization is unique, and the appropriate response may vary.

Leading During a Crisis

Management during a crisis isn't easy, but employers can take steps to mitigate the impact of gossip. Every workplace is different, and employers should consider how communication initiatives will resonate with their employees.

For additional resources, contact Deutsch & Associates, LLC.