Resolving Negative Talk About The Boss



Lets face it, many employees talk negatively about their boss. There are a plethora of TV and movie story lines that showcase bad bosses and the employees who talk about their bad bosses. Like it or not people often express their frustrations by saying negative things about other people. It is difficult to eliminate negativity in the workplace but it is important to manage it directly and quickly when it arises.

Stop and Assess the Situation

Patterns exist for a reason. They allow us to look forward to see what may be about to happen and to look back and see what may have caused something to happen. Negative comments are a symptom of something more but determining what that something is can take time and effort. It is fare to say that many of these 'bosses' deserve the negative comments. Just as it is fare to say that many bosses who do not deserve the negative comments. Regardless of whether or not a boss deserves a negative comment those negative comments have to be resolved.

If an employee is speaking negatively about a supervisor it is worth opening your ears to determine if the comments have merit consider 1) if the employee is the first or alone in the negativity an 2) If your own observations or the observations of others support the negativity and 3) if the negativity is illuminating any serious concerns that need to be addressed as soon as possible especially due to concerns related to liability.

While it can be worth considering if there is merit to any negative comments you have to take steps to eliminate the noise being created by the negative comments quickly.

Facilitate a Conversation

To begin you will need to start a conversation with or between the supervisor and the employee. You can speak to both individuals alone, you can speak to them together or you can ask them to sit down together and have a conversation without an HR presence. Depending on how long standing, contentious and, to some extent, accurate the negative comments have been beginning by brining them together as step one can be a good solid option.

It may seem counter intuitive to bring together two parties without first speaking to them individually and laying the ground work but it can be a way to deescalate a situation that may not need to be escalated. At times it can be the most straightforward and simplifying option to just allow two adults to have a personal

conversation and air their differences. Assuming that the negativity is not too long standing and acrimonious and there is no history of serious complaints on either side this can be the way to begin.

Consider these options to arrange a conversation:

Head over to each individual and mention that you have heard there may be a lack of cohesion in the current working relationship but do not offer details. Ask if each would be willing to sit down together and talk about their working relationship and share their frustrations or concerns. Ask further if they would be willing to self-manage the situation or if they would prefer the support of HR.

Option 1: Self-managed: If both seem comfortable sitting down together ask that they be honest in their concerns and non-judgemental or defensive when listening to the other persons perspective. Provide the paring a simple tips sheet that asks them to write down their feelings or concerns and offers a few suggestions for how to manage the conversation. Keep in mind that your employees may be capable of managing the situation if given the opportunity to address their working relationship as two adults.

Options 2: Supported: The only difference between option 2 and option 1 is that HR can be involved to either facilitate or support the process, HR may choose to take the lead or sit back and be a resource.

Option 3: Separated: Sometimes the circumstances lend themselves more to addressing the situation by approaching each person individually. This involves speaking to the supervisor and developing a strategy for the supervisor to improve his/her relationship with the employee and also speaking to the employee to demonstrate that you are willing to listen while at the same time communicating that the negative commentary is unacceptable.

The point of meeting with the negative employee is not initially to address his/her concerns but to express that the negative comments must be eliminated. While you do want to communicate that you are listening and paying attention to his/her concerns the emphasis is ion the importance of stopping the negativity and then asking the employee to work with the supervisor and/or HR to address any real concerns.

Sometimes just putting the situation on the table is enough to begin the process of resolution. Individuals want to feel heard and that their experiences matter. Drawing attention to the fact that negativity is being noticed and does not help can be enough to remind an employee that negativity is not the way to go. Your employees should be given the opportunity to understand that once any real concerns over safety or inappropriate behaviours are eliminated it is up to them to find a way to work effectively with other employees. Communicate clearly through your policies, processes and overt conversations that asking smack behind someone’s back is not the way a concern should be addressed in the workplace.