Resolving the Issue When a Supervisor Lies About Another Employee



6 Steps to reconcile a supervisor and the employee harmed with a lie

Disciplining an employee is difficult enough, but when a supervisor's behaviour requires disciplinary intervention, it can create tension in the workplace. Supervisors are not above using dishonest tactics to preserve their reputation, and a supervisor who uses a subordinate employee as a scapegoat can cause serious damage to their company and to employee morale.

Disciplining Supervisors Who Publicly Break Trust with Their Staff

Supervisors often have high pressure jobs with many responsibilities. When a serious mistake or lapse of judgment occurs, it is tempting to deflect blame by creating a scapegoat. Unless the mistake was so egregious as to lead to suspension and termination, you have to find a way to allow the supervisor to continue to do his/her job.

It is possible to discipline a supervisor while he/she continues perform his/her normal job functions, but you must tread delicately. By choosing to discipline a supervisor privately, you may prevent gossip or speculation among employees which contribute to an uncomfortable or unproductive work environment. Your supervisor also benefits by gaining the opportunity to change his/her behavior without losing the appearance of leadership.

However, if your supervisor unfairly places blame on an employee, it is prudent to discipline your supervisor while publicly condemning his/her behaviour. Although confidentiality rules only allow you to inform employees that you are 'addressing the situation,' it is important to take actions that let employees know that you are taking the infraction seriously and that similar violations of their trust will not be tolerated.

Your Actions Speak Louder than the Supervisor's Failure

The mistake of one supervisor does not speak for the entire organization, but your actions (or failure to act) will. If you to fail to discipline a supervisor for dishonest behaviour, employees may lose confidence, under-perform, leave or interpret your failure to act as a tacit acceptance of dishonesty. If you continue to employ your supervisor, be careful not to undermine his/her ability to supervise and manage

a team.

In a previous Insider article, *How To Discipline Badly Behaving Managers*, we explored 3 steps relevant to addressing discipline of a manager. They were:

1. Increased management oversight
2. Employee survey and feedback
3. Additional team supervision

You can administer discipline with the use of these three steps, but this may not be enough. When a badly behaving supervisor complicates the situation by involving one or more of their employees, you must take action to resolve the underlying harm.

Recognizing the Scope of The Problem

When a supervisor's behaviour involves his/her subordinate, you need to acknowledge the harm to the employee. This harm can include damaging the employees' confidence in himself/herself, the relationship with the supervisor and other team members, and undermine the trust the employee has in the organization. Failing to address these realities places an unfair burden on the employee. This may or may not fall under the categories of workplace harassment or creating a hostile work environment, but it certainly causes harm to your employee.

One solution may be to offer the employee the opportunity to move to another team, and some employees may welcome this option. However, if they are not completely in favour of this solution, you may end up punishing the employee and even rewarding the supervisor.

As you discipline the supervisor, you can choose to ignore the harm to the employee or you can offer an opportunity for reconciliation. This opportunity for reconciliation is not in place of discipline but part of the process.

Reconciliation or Avoidance

What is reconciliation? The word reconciliation has many meanings, including 'composing or settling something' and 'bringing harmony' and 'agreement' to a situation. In this situation, it is an opportunity to allow the employee to find closure and the supervisor to admit the mistake, take ownership, and move on.

6 Steps Towards Reconciliation

1) **Securing an Apology**: As an act of moving forward, ask the supervisor if he/she will apologize and make amends for the inappropriate actions. This process only works if the supervisor admits the error, feels remorse, and wants to apologize. Do not undertake these actions if the supervisor does not exhibit remorse or a willingness to take full responsibility.

2) **Hearing An Apology**: If the supervisor is in agreement and you believe the intentions are positive, speak to the harmed employee and determine if the employee is willing to participate in a reconciliation meeting. Do not ask the employee until you are certain of the supervisor's willingness. If the employee says no, then you cannot proceed.

3) **Clarify Expectations:** If you have agreement from both parties, clarify that there is no expectation that the employee must accept an apology or forgive the transgressor. Indicate this is an opportunity for the employee to listen to the supervisor's apology.

4) **Establish the Meeting Plan:**

- **Set the meeting**: Select a meeting time and place and choose a friendly environment. Avoid using the room where the discipline previously occurred.
- **Control the meeting**: At the appointed time, the supervisor should arrive first and be seated in the 'middle' of the room. Have no more than one other person in the room with the supervisor. It is appropriate to include other people in the meeting process (such as an HR manager, a department manager, a staff or union rep), but have them wait and be introduced to the employee outside the room before the meeting occurs.

5) **Manage the Meeting Moments:**

- **Invite the employee into the room:** Make introductions. Ask the employee to select a seat. This small detail invites the employee to feel control over his/her surroundings.
- **Begin the conversation**: Begin the conversation by mentioning why you are all there. Invite the supervisor to share what he/she would like to say. The supervisor may or may not want to include a written apology.
- **Move the conversation ahead**: Ask the employee if he has any questions or has anything to say. Unless the employee says or acts in an inappropriate or threatening way, allow him/her to share thoughts, feelings and emotions or say nothing at all.

6) **Close the Meeting**: Thank them both for their participation and invite the employee to leave. Do not ask the employee to take action, such as shake hands with the supervisor. Thank them both again privately for their willingness to participate.

This meeting is a powerful transition point for moving forward. With disciplinary steps that include oversight and supervision, a successful meeting will be essential in helping the entire team return to productivity.

Additional Insider Resources

Can You Fire An Employee For Telling A Lie

Is A Supervisors Bullying Grounds for Constructive Dismissal?

How To Discipline Badly Behaving Managers