



Leaders Fearing Employee Truths Stifle Problem Solving

Employees often fear raising negative issues in the workplace with management, fearing retribution. Employee fears are a symptom of managers who are just as fearful of harm to the organization and their positions should they recognize the issues exist.

It is a fact in the workplace – many employees fear reporting issues that managers consider negative and harmful personally or to the organization. The employee fears are often based in the belief there will be management retribution for reporting workplace problems. The truth about retribution is that it often emanates from fears that managers and supervisors are experiencing and letting drive their responses.

It is fear that leads to managers at all levels to take action which might be very subtle or flagrantly discriminatory. When the message is sent through management words and behaviors that issues, like workplace harassment or violations of the laws, should not be discussed, problems are not resolved. The consequences include creation of a toxic workplace, low employee engagement and a high risk of legal action by employees or government action against the organization. Addressing the fears driving toxic leadership behaviors is needed to create a workplace where employees trust leaders enough to bring forward issues for resolution.

Defensive Behaviors Perpetuate Organizational Problems.

Managers at all levels use a variety of tactics meant to discourage employees from bringing workplace issues into the open. Employees who do not trust management and are fearful of retaliation eventually leave for another employer or stay and join the ranks of the employees with low engagement. Either way, serious issues remain unresolved. It is no good for the employees or the organization as a whole.

A lot of emphasis is placed on developing laws that give employees options when they believe they are being harassed or discriminated against for reporting problems. The laws do not solve the real problem which is managers creating a toxic workplace in which employees are fearful of speaking the truth. The employee truths cover a wide range of issues, including bullying in the workplace, ethical and legal violations, harassment, abusive supervisors, health and safety violations, and discrimination or bias. How a manager or supervisor responds to employees who bring issues forward has a direct impact on whether employees believe they can trust management to treat them fairly and work on solutions to the problems or must stay silent.

Employees experience retaliation in many forms. Supervisors may start berating the staff member in front of co-workers to reduce the employee's influence on others. Other typical behaviors include ignoring the issue, getting defensive, and blaming the employee for the problem. Some leaders will try to drive the employee out of the organization by giving a poor performance review, denying a well-earned promotion or reducing a pay increase. There is much discussion on developing



employee trust in management, but that is not possible unless organizational leaders address the reasons they react to employee issues the way they do.

Start at the Beginning

The fear employees feel develops because of the fear leaders experience. Knowing this, it makes sense to reverse the process. Begin with changing the perspectives and behaviors of managers and supervisors which in turn leads to employees who learn to trust management. There are many reasons a leader becomes fearful when an employee brings an issue up. One is self-preservation. The leader has the perspective that employees who are complaining about something or pointing to a problem are criticizing his or her leadership. A supervisor may worry that his/her manager will blame him for the problem, or a manager worries the problem is a major issue that reflects on the organization and can damage its reputation.

Leaders who fear getting the blame or reprisal will get defensive. It applies to managers at all levels, from the C-suite to the frontline leader. People who get defensive will begin a thought process that is meant to absolve themselves of blame and squelch future reports of problems. The person begins an internal dialogue to convince him or herself that acknowledging what the employee is saying can cause personal embarrassment, encourage other employees to step up, threaten the leader's job or status within the organization or publicly harm the organization.

The focus is not on problem resolution at this point. Leaders in self defense mode are likely to react in a non-productive manner. Some will get more belligerent and verbally abusive towards employees. Others will blame employees for causing trouble and retaliate in some manner. There are also defensive leaders who will use their personal biases to work against the employee's success, micromanaging their work or finding ways to marginalize the employee.

Rebuilding Employee Trust

Retaliatory responses are never appropriate and create a hostile workplace. They never serve a good purpose. It is necessary to rebuild employee trust in management, meaning the process begins with management. Training managers and supervisors on effectively handling, rather than avoiding, employee complaints, grievances and even negative statements is important. Ideally, each leader will identify their fears and assess why they react poorly in these situations. Some fears are due to lack of knowledge of the appropriate response. Do managers know how to ask employees non-threatening questions, have meaningful dialogue, co-create solutions, and project safety rather than fear? Emotional self-awareness is a key attribute of successful leaders. They do not project their personal fears onto others. Instead, they learn to recognize situations that trigger their reactions and respond appropriately.

Relieving manager and supervisor fears begins at the top. All leaders need to know that they will be held accountable for following up on problems and asking for help, if needed. Best practices are focused on problem resolution. For example, an employee complains of discrimination. Instead of ignoring the issue, leaders should discuss the situation with the employee as an objective active listener. If one-on-one dialogue does not lead to resolution or at least an action plan, the employee should be encouraged to utilize the formal grievance process to move the matter to the next level.



Many managers fear telling employees to use formal reporting channels, when in fact it demonstrates the leader cares about helping the employee find resolution and is not afraid of the subsequent investigation that will take place.

Recognize Personal Fears

Fear is a powerful emotion that drives thoughts and behaviors. When supervisors are fearful, they tend to rely on their position of power to interact with employees, often aggravating the situation. Effective leaders recognize their personal issues and strive to reduce their impact on how they respond to employees.