

Strategies for More Successful Workplace Communications

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When I speak with managers at client companies, virtually all of them tell me that they welcome employee complaints and have an open door policy. As a general rule, this is a sound business practice.

Trouble occurs, however, when managers step in to resolve conflict too soon and unwittingly fall into communication triangles – discussions about feelings, opinions or personal issues regarding an individual *with a third party, as opposed to directly with the offending individual.*

Communication triangles typically involve three people who alternately switch roles (the victim, the persecutor and the rescuer), depending upon with whom they are speaking. Although the practice may temporarily make some employees feel better (since they can talk about their grievances), communication triangles can create toxic corporate cultures with unresolved complaints and rampant gossip.

Eliminating communication triangles is one of the best strategies for improving overall communications in your workplace. Here are a few suggestions to get you started:

Limit venting. Venting may be good for the soul, but it is actually not very productive. In fact, it is an avoidance technique that actually *creates* triangulation. Hear your employee out and then ask him what action he will take to resolve the problem.

Encourage employees to resolve problems on their own first. While you may have good intentions to solve your employees' problems for them, this can be counterproductive. Set the expectation that your employees are adults who should work things out with their coworkers. If you jump in too soon, your employees will let you take responsibility for resolving every issue for them.

Use employee complaints as an opportunity to teach. The real world is often the best classroom. The next time an employee asks you for help with a conflict, ask him the following types of questions:

- How did you react?
- Why do you think this happened?
- What do you think you could do to help solve this problem?
- What could you say to this person to begin working on a solution?

Asking questions such as these removes you from the “rescuer” role and forces your employee to

start thinking through his own solutions – and directs him back to the source of his problem. If the employee finds this difficult, help him role play the situation. To encourage follow-through, ask him to report back to you with his next step, once he has completed the conversation.

Try to avoid taking sides. In a communication triangle, people are more likely to embellish the truth or give you only partial information. If an employee tries to put you in the middle of a conflict, take a step back. Your best strategy is to reserve judgement until you observe circumstances first-hand.

Refuse to carry a message from one person to another. If an employee is dodging responsibility for direct communication by asking you to intervene for him, don't do it. A simple statement such as "I might mix up what you've said, so perhaps you could tell him yourself" is the best way to encourage direct communication.

Bring all parties involved together. If two people repeatedly talk with you about each other, bring them face to face. Offer to meet with both of them together or help them find a mediator to resolve their issues.

Lead by example. Employees look to you to set the standard practices for how conflict is resolved. Reinforce the communication coaching you give staff members. When you face conflict, constructively approach those who have the power to make changes, rather than complaining to those who don't.

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