

9 ways managers contribute to toxic talk (and don't know it)



Grumpy coworkers, office gossips, and quick-to-point-the-finger colleagues have been around for ages, unfortunately. Now add to that the pressure and emotion caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and a turbulent political climate. At many workplaces, the atmosphere has never been riper for an abundance of toxic talk.

“Managers may not be self-aware,” says Darren Virassammy, COO of the organizational consultancy [34 Strong](#). “They may not know how much their actions, tone, and non-verbal cues will impact the people they lead. They are not aware that they can be the thermostat that not only measures the temperature but can have a massively controlling effect on the temperature of the team. That temperature shows up in the talk that we see in the workplace.”

Negativity, harsh words, sarcasm, blame, bullying, and the like take a toll on staff. Stress and anxiety increase while morale and productivity nosedive. Managers who ignore toxic talk or contribute to it — even unknowingly — stifle company success and often send valuable talent scrambling for the nearest exit. Leaders must be cognizant of the behaviors outlined below, otherwise, they may be unintentionally engaging in and reinforcing toxic behavior.

1. Participating in gossip

By allowing staff members to circulate rumors or speculate about issues and individuals, managers unwittingly

send a message of tolerance for this type of toxic talk. Some managers take it a step further and actually join in on gossip sessions. If the boss doesn't discourage the rumor mill or even feeds it, what incentive do others have to stop?

2. Lacking transparency

Honest and consistent communication keeps everyone in the loop. Failure to provide information opens the door to employees filling in their own details.

Keep workers from assuming the worst and spreading their negative theories to others by sharing as much as possible. Serve as a steady, reliable source even if you do not possess all the answers. The ever-changing nature of the pandemic has many a leader frankly admitting "I don't know," which is preferable to radio silence.

3. Enforcing policies inconsistently

Employees despise unequal treatment, so expect toxic talk in the workplace if people witness favoritism. A manager who lets certain workers come in late without reprimand or accepts excuses about missed deadlines from particular individuals sets the stage for disgruntled remarks from those who follow the rules.

4. Silencing some people but not others

In a similar vein, managers must watch how they address (or fail to address) toxic talk about current events. For instance, allowing a passionate Trump supporter to hold court at the watercooler but telling an equally vocal Democrat to stop talking politics in the office breeds resentment. It also promotes an edgy atmosphere where workers seek out others sharing their bent to engage in behind-the-scenes toxic conversation.

5. Ignoring online behavior

With so many organizations operating remotely, toxic talk nowadays may occur online. Unfortunately, remarks delivered in this manner oftentimes are harsher and more frequent. Without face-to-face interactions, people do not check themselves as thoroughly. Likewise, perpetrators believe they are less likely to be discovered or punished. Managers who fail to address proper online behavior with their staff, never monitor Slack channels and similar outlets, or don't take online harassment and bullying complaints seriously risk open season for toxic talk — and potential lawsuits.

6. Failing to do one-to-one chats

Between full plates and a remote environment, many managers today lapse on talking with team members individually. Ignoring this practice, however, could prove a huge mistake. One-to-ones offer a chance to hear about things going on at work beyond projects at hand, including comments circulating that are making someone uncomfortable. Personal meetings also boost connection, which aids in keeping down toxic talk about whether or not management cares.

7. Not valuing true participation

Managers need to create an environment where people feel psychologically safe to share their ideas. A leader who asks for suggestions and immediately shoots them down tarnishes that atmosphere. Similarly, a manager who puts his ideas out on the table first and then spends time defending them rather than listening to alternatives discourages participation.

"When this takes place, people stop coming in, and often the toxic talk and culture begin to spike," Virassammy says.

8. Being a poor role model

Managers set the tone for their teams. When they gripe about customers, trash their own boss, or disrespect people with opposing viewpoints, others feel justified doing the same. Toxic talk becomes the office norm. Some employees may even think they must adopt such behaviors to fit in or to stay on their supervisor's good side.

9. Failing to acknowledge positives

Admittedly, the past year has been tough on virtually everyone. Dealing both professionally and personally with a world in turmoil has left many individuals stressed out, anxious, and down in the dumps. People, including managers, can fall into ruts where it's easy to see the worst in everything and let toxic talk run rampant.

While perhaps not easy, breaking this cycle can start from above. Celebrate small victories and recognize staff achievements. This breath of fresh air can prove a powerful measure against a workplace filled with toxicity.

Additional Resource: [4 ways bosses contribute to employee stress and 4 ways to address it.](#)