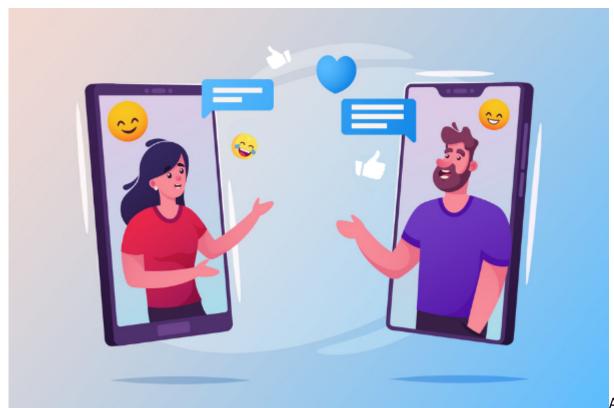# 8 tips for keeping workplace chats and direct messages from turning toxic

A positive work environment in which employees feel respected and safe encourages productivity, morale, and retention. Thus, an organization has a vested interest in eliminating harassment, bullying, belittling, gossip, and other types of toxic talk among staff.

While such behavior still sometimes takes the form of whispers around the office or encounters out of earshot from the boss, an increasing number of toxic actions occur online. The faceless nature of chat rooms and direct messages often makes instigators bolder than they would be in person and less worried about being caught.

The COVID-19 pandemic also contributes to the problem of toxic communication. Remote workers increasingly have relied on virtual interaction during a time of great uncertainty and challenges. Discombobulated, irate, and bored employees may lack as many filters, possess a shorter fuse, or simply get a charge out of stirring up trouble.

The best time to address such issues is before they turn into a major plague — or a lawsuit. Here are eight strategies for managers to employ.

Remind workers to stay professional

While many office standards have fallen by the wayside during remote operations, respectful behavior cannot

be among them. Proper treatment of others must endure whether dressed in sweatpants at home or sporting a suit on the fifth floor of a high-rise.

Slack and similar communication outlets add to the casual atmosphere. While this informal environment helps to maintain workplace culture among a scattered team, employees cannot consider it a free-for-all. Bonding over pets and shared recipes is one thing; spouting racist comments is quite another. Make certain everyone knows to follow the same advice given to junior high students: If you wouldn't say it to someone's face, don't say it online.

Point out interpretation problems

Without the aid of body language, facial expressions, and tone, messages may be received differently than the sender intended. Jokes may not come out as funny, and bold type or all caps can come off as hostile.

Don't assume people inherently know how to communicate properly in chats, DMs, or emails. Encourage workers to think about what they write, aim for clarity, and reread words before sending. Insist that anything potentially sensitive or confusing gets handled via video conferencing to maximize understanding.

Educate staff on policy

If your employee handbook lacks information on cyber behavior, add it now. Then, make everyone aware of expectations and consequences. Highlight, too, that electronic messages on company devices and communication channels are property of the organization and subject to back-up, download, and review.

Provide outlets to report improper behavior

Let employees know that you want questionable comments drawn to management's attention. Whether on-site or remote, every person should know who to notify and by what method.

Managers aren't always privy to what goes on behind the scenes, so it pays to enlist the help of everyone on staff. Bystanders who witness toxic talk, however, may be reluctant to come forward. Anonymous, periodic surveys offer a place to alert the company to possible problems, such as a chat room that routinely includes sexist remarks.

Conduct one-to-one check-ins

Talking with team members individually on a routine basis provides the opportunity to learn more about each person's experiences at the company. You may get wind of talk that's making the employee uncomfortable at a much earlier stage rather than first hearing of it when someone files a formal complaint or quits.

Personal meetings also may cut down on toxic talk about management. Such interaction boosts connection and shows that the organization cares about each worker.

Don't ignore complaints

Awareness of toxic talk is just the first step. Managers need to act in accordance with company policy to address a problem and follow up on it. Failure to do so disheartens victims and sends perpetrators the message that nobody cares to confront them.

Stay alert

Try to spot signs of trouble. Doing so may be more difficult when dealing with remote staff, but it pays to make

the effort. Is someone not participating in meetings or clamming up when a certain colleague joins the group? Has someone asked you to run interference with another team member or requested to be transferred to a different project? Does a staff email thread include uncalled-for or hostile remarks? These things could signal trouble. Inquiring at an early stage is preferable to missing the conflict up until a valuable employee resigns.

Be a good role model

Lastly, remember that you set the tone for your team. Watch your own spoken and written language. Off-color jokes, insensitive remarks, "harmless" teasing, gossiping, and similar toxic talk are less likely to seem off-limits if the person in charge partakes too.