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I think most companies suffer with gossip and backbiting in the workplace, and few are completely successful at eliminating this problem. I am certain it erodes morale. What can supervisors do to effect change in this area?

Organizational psychologist Glenn D. Rolfsen, Ph.D., discovered through working with over 200 companies that gossip and backbiting are indeed stubborn problems. And he documented that eliminating these problems will indeed increase productivity, reduce absenteeism, and improve morale. The tactic he discovered, after failing in other attempts, was to change behavior associated with gossip, which helped employees acquire new habits of personal awareness to change the behavior. Beyond being personally aware, he calls this “new consciousness.” He did three things that produced the result he wanted. 1) Educate employees about gossip’s toxic effects, and 2) Get everyone to sign a commitment to eliminate gossip. 3) He discovered a way to keep that goal in front of everyone effectively to achieve “top of mind awareness.” It worked. See his TEDx presentation on this achievement and consider what may fit with your situation. Source: YouTube.com (search for “Glenn D. Rolfsen, TEDxOslo”)

We had an employee experience a major heart attack. It was dramatic and frightening, but the hard part for me was the next day. As the boss, I was unsure what action to take other than responding like everyone else to the shock and processing it. What should a manager do?

When tragedies like the one you describe strike the workplace, the immediate response is usually obvious—engaging first responders and immediate needs. Days later, supervisors wonder, “What’s my role in helping everyone? What do I say? How do I act?” You will make a huge impact on employees with the simplest things: being more available, being empathetic, engaging the EAP, modeling your own need to process and share feelings, being a good communicator, making it easier for others to spend time discussing or processing their reactions, finding ways to lighten the load, and being flexible with work demands. You will be surprised how employees will thank you later. You may think to yourself, “Wow, I didn’t do much.” But in fact, you really did all that was needed. Supervisors represent the organization, and tragic events are always remembered in terms of how “the organization responded.” That’s you.

I don’t want to ignore my gut if I think an employee is struggling with a serious personal problem. I know I can’t probe, diagnose, or cross boundaries, but what compromise can be made so I don’t ignore signals of what might be a significant unaddressed need?

Supervisors may naturally come to know their employees quite well as they discover their work goals, ambitions, personality styles, and whatever personal information they choose to share about their lives. It follows that the same supervisors will notice when things are not quite right. It is then appropriate to ask—and supervisors should ask—how employees are doing. These meaningful conversations with supervisors may lead to employees getting help for personal problems. Seeing an employee at his or her desk all day, not interacting with others, should concern you if it is uncharacteristic. Showing concern could lead to the discovery of a serious matter and referral to the EAP. Domestic abuse issues are sometimes spotted this way.