How to Deal with Unhappy Employees

As we have noted in a previous blog, disgruntled workers are a drain on your company. Today's business environment is volatile, and people become anxious in times of uncertainty. The result is that some of your employees are going to become unhappy and they are going to start rumors or start complaining in a way that will de-motivate your team. Unhappy and unproductive employees can threaten your business, no matter what role they play in the organization. You need to disarm these toxic naysayers before they can do irreparable damage to your team's productivity and ultimately your company.

There was an interesting post recently from the *Harvard Business Review* offering nine tips on how to deal with disgruntled employees. As Rosabeth Moss Kanter writes in her blog entry:

> "In one recent case, the chief financial officer of a small company was fired for possible expense account violations, and he was also seen as a poor strategist and weak team player. The former CFO did not go quietly. He consulted a lawyer, then went to a second and a third when the first one said he didn't have a case. He rallied friends who sent emails to prominent customers about his grievance. Meanwhile, the CEO and new CFO had to raise capital and revenues to make up for the shortfall, which the disgruntled former CFO blamed on everyone else. His loud voice and tale of mistreatment threatened to topple the entire enterprise."

Here is a synopsis of Kanter's advice on how to deal with disgruntled workers:

1. Don’t give problem workers power. Isolate problem employees by creating a single line of managerial command so that disgruntled worker’s complaints and concerns can only go to one manager, which means they have a minimal impact on overall productivity.

2. Keep telling the positive story. Remind everyone about the organization’s mission, its accomplishments, and its goals so others don’t get mired in the negative minutiae.

3. Don’t get angry. Keep your tone calm and professional, and don’t start retelling stories or gossip. Recent research shows that those who tell tales are the ones who end up looking the worst.

4. Don’t restate complaints for the other party. If you have to address a negative issue or concern, use simple statements and acknowledge that a problem has arisen. Don’t lend credibility to the complaints by providing information that may or may not be an issue for other workers.

5. Never assume that being right is enough. Make sure you have all the facts for the court, but remember that facts don’t always carry weight in the court of public opinion. You need to operate from your convictions and demonstrate good judgment, authenticity, and consistency.

6. Use small gestures. You may not be completely in the right, and a slight concession can demonstrate empathy and understanding. Offering a disgruntled worker a small “win” can make it easier to resolve a larger conflict, but set clear limits.

7. Nip rumors in the bud. Don’t let rumors and false statements stand without a response. Be forthright, accurate, and if you can, memorable in your response so you can put forward an accurate counter story without repeating the original rumor.

8. Keep your allies well informed. Get their support and give them facts and details.

9. Keep moving forward. Don’t let a problem employee or rumors disrupt operations if you can avoid it. Announce plans and keep everyone focused on a positive future.

Part of the job of senior managers is to keep the corporate vision alive. When you have toxic employees undermining operations, it’s challenging to keep your eye on long-term objectives, but the best defense against cranky workers is maintaining a positive attitude and a clear vision, and sharing that vision.