



## **Loose Lipped Leaders**

**by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP**

A leader with loose lips is a real disaster. I recall early in my career overhearing a manager in my division going from one cubicle to the next, and saying to each person, "I heard this on the QT, so don't tell anybody, but..." After hearing this manager share the same information with 3-4 other people asking each person not to tell anyone else, I lost all respect for that leader. Doing this in an area where there were cubicles rather than closed offices shows that this manager had a deficiency in intelligence as well as discretion.

Integrity is one of the most important characteristics for any leader. The idea of a leader who intentionally spreads gossip is repugnant. I can only imagine the motivation of the errant manager for his actions. I suppose he was attempting to buy loyalty by letting certain people in on the inside dope. The ploy backfired. He was quickly labeled as an individual who could not be trusted to keep private information confidential. A leader who is not trustworthy gains no trust.

It reminds me of the leader who tells one employee some negative information about a fellow employee. It might sound like this, "Confidentially, I am worried about Martha; I think she may have a drinking problem, but please keep that to yourself." Any employee hearing such inappropriate information casually leaked by a manager would wonder, "What is he telling other people about me when I am not around to defend myself?" A manager with no integrity simply has no credibility. We all know this, so why do some leaders spread gossip anyway?

Depending on the topic and other conditions in the organization, it may be tempting at times to share privileged information based on some rationalism. For example, picture a work unit that will be experiencing a downsizing in the next quarter. The information has not been announced to the organization at this point, but the leader wants to be sure adequate cross training occurs for a particular individual who will replace one of the exiting employees. The manager may pull Martha, the employee who is staying, aside and say something like, "I need to share that Alice is going to be leaving in the RIF next

month. This is not public information yet, so please keep it confidential, but you will be taking on her responsibilities. Please begin to pay attention to what she is doing with her clients, because there will not be much time for cross training once the layoffs are announced."

Trying to mitigate potential problems by warning certain individuals of an action ahead of time may sound like a positive step, but it is a disaster on many levels. Let's examine the real impact of such a discussion.

- It will cause Martha to act in ways that tip Alice off that she is doomed.
- It plays favorites with one employee, which will leak out to others.
- Martha may also leak the information to others either unwittingly or on purpose.
- Other people may surface asking about their status in the RIF.
- The manager has lost the respect of Martha, at least, and many others as well.

A far better approach is to be transparent about the entire situation early to allow public discussions of how people can cope with this difficult transition. Even if the news is bad, you are better off making it public as early as possible, because then you can be more helpful to both the employees who leave and the employees who remain.

One way to build trust with people is to refuse to discuss information out of turn. One of the easiest ways to destroy trust is to show a violation of someone else's trust when talking in private to another person. Don't do it!

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