

Your Team Talks About You: How to Handle Workplace Gossip

THE MANAGER TRACK · EPISODE 337 CLIFF NOTES

The main messages from the episode: why teams talk about the boss, how to tell noise from feedback, the 4 buckets the talk falls into and what to say to each, and a 2-minute habit that brings hallway conversations into the open.

01 The core idea

If you manage people, your team talks about you when you're not in the room, even if you're very good at the job. That comes with the role. Whether your team talks about you is already settled. The useful questions are what they're talking about and what it tells you.

> **WHY TEAMS TALK ABOUT THE BOSS**
>
> **Talking about the person who has authority over your work is how a team makes sense of what's unclear.** What did that decision mean? Is this fair? What's coming next? If those questions aren't answered by you, they get answered in the hallway, or at home with a partner or a friend.

52 min
a day, on average, spent talking about someone who wasn't in the room

~75%
of that talk was neutral: people keeping each other up to date

15% / 9%
was negative and positive. A lot of what we call gossip is updates.

Source: Megan Robbins and Alexander Karan, UC Riverside. 467 people wore a small recorder that captured short samples of their day. Social Psychological and Personality Science, 2019.

What it looks like

Tom is about a year into managing his team, and he's doing a lot right. Then he hears secondhand that people think he's playing favorites. What happened: one person asked him for a stretch assignment in a one-on-one, so Tom gave him a high-visibility project. Nobody else knew that ask happened.

From where everyone else sat, one person got the good project and nobody explained why. He didn't have less on his plate, and he hadn't done better work than the rest of them. So the team made up a story, and it wasn't one that assumed good intentions.

Tom hadn't done anything wrong. He left a gap, and the team filled it with an explanation that made sense to them. That's the pattern Ramona sees with capable managers: the talk traces back to a decision that made sense to the manager and was never explained to anyone else.

> **"If we don't explain our decisions, usually the people that are impacted by our decisions will do the explaining for you."**
>
> Ramona Shaw, Episode 337

02 Noise or feedback? 3 questions

Sometimes the talk is accurate. A manager who is struggling or making poor calls will often hear about it this way first, and treating it as noise is a mistake at any level of experience. Run a quick check:

1. **Is it about you, or about a decision you made?**
2. **Is it one person, or the same thing from several directions?**
   Or something that also came up a few months ago?
3. **Would you hear the same thing if you asked people directly?**

> **THE RULE OF THUMB**
>
> If it's personal, consistent, and would survive a direct question, take it seriously as feedback, even if it wasn't delivered to you on a silver platter.

Example: the canceled one-on-ones

3 different people in 3 different settings mention that your one-on-ones keep getting canceled. That isn't people being annoyed about something they shouldn't be. It's data about your calendar and how it affects them. They're raising it because it costs them something: they feel they don't get enough of your attention, that their time isn't respected, or that they can't count on you when they hit a roadblock. The fix is in your hands.

03 Read it: the 4 buckets

When you hear something, sort it first. Each bucket needs a different response. A lot of what managers hear lands in the first 3. The fourth stings, and it's the one to slow down on.

BUCKET	WHAT PEOPLE ARE ASKING	YOUR RESPONSE
1. Decisions	Why did we do this? Lack of clarity or disagreement about a call you made.	Explain your reasoning, more often than feels necessary.
2. Fairness	Who gets what: promotions, bonuses, assignments, responsibilities.	Make the process visible, including how to put your hand up.
3. The future	What's going to happen to us? Where are we headed? How does it affect me?	Share what you know, what you don't know yet, and when you'll know more.
4. You	Your style or your judgment: "hard to read," "changes direction a lot."	Get curious, check with people you trust, then change one visible thing.

For managers who are learning and working to get better, the talk is usually about clarity and fairness. That's good news. Both come down to how and how often you communicate, and neither is a personality trait.

Recap

WHEN	THE MOVE
You hear something secondhand	Sort it into a bucket and run the 3 questions.
It's about a decision or the future	Explain your reasoning, including what you don't know yet.
It's about fairness	Make the process visible and say how to put a hand up.
It's about you	Ask people you trust, then change one visible thing.
Someone brings it to you	Thank them, don't ask who, take a day, then act.

04 Respond to the bucket

Decisions and the future: explain more, including what you don't know

Explain your reasoning, and repeat it. When you feel like you're saying it too often, that's usually when your communication lands. And share what you don't know yet. Managers focus on providing clarity about what's been decided and forget that saying what hasn't been decided creates clarity too.

SAY THIS

"I know there's been some talk about the reorg. Here's what I know, here's what I don't, and here's when I expect to know more. I'll keep you updated as soon as I have additional information."

Fairness: make the process visible

If stretch projects, schedules or recognition feel random from the outside, tell people how they're decided and how to put their hand up.

SAY THIS

"A couple of people have asked how project assignments work, so let me lay it out. If you want something like this, here's how to get on the list and here's how to bring it up."

You: be curious before you own it or defend it

Don't get defensive and try to explain yourself, and don't announce an immediate personality overhaul. Ask 1 or 2 people you trust whether it matches what they see.

SAY THIS

"I became aware of some concerns people are sharing. How do you perceive that? Is this something you see as well? In what type of situations does this come up?"

If it holds up, pick one visible thing to do differently, focus on it consistently, and get that win before you move to the next. A big change for 2 weeks followed by old habits erodes trust further than never changing anything.

05 Open the channel

Make the direct route the normal one. In your one-on-ones, ask for what you're missing. These questions show care rather than emotional reaction.

ASK IN YOUR ONE-ON-ONES

"What's the team saying about the change that I might not be hearing?"

AND

"If something about how I'm handling this isn't landing, I'd rather hear it from you than secondhand."

The first time, you may get "Oh, nothing really." Keep asking. When something comes up, act on it visibly, so people learn you'll do something with feedback and there's no retribution for it.

06 When someone tells you "people are saying..."

How you respond in that moment decides whether anyone ever does it again. Thank them. Don't ask for names, and don't react to the content on the spot. That takes emotional management.

SAY THIS

"Thank you for telling me. I'm not going to ask who said it. Just give me a day to think about it so I know what to do next."

Then do something with it and let them see what you did: change what needs changing, be more transparent, or talk with the people affected about what you're improving, without saying "I heard" or "someone told me."

DON'T	WHY
Try to find out who said it, or ask one person to report back to you	It makes them the mole on the team. It hurts morale, puts them in a conflicted spot and erodes trust.
Address it in a group meeting: "I've heard some of you are saying..."	It tells the team they were right to keep the conversation away from you.

07 What the research says

Gossip calms people down

Matthew Feinberg and colleagues at UC Berkeley had people watch someone cheat in a game. Observers' heart rates went up. When they could pass a note warning the next player, heart rates came back down and they felt less frustrated. When your team talks about fairness behind your back, they're running a check, and you can make that check easy to pass. In the moment it also feels like bonding, which is why it can leave a "gossip hangover" later.

> Feinberg, Willer, Stellar and Keltner, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 2012

Why managers hear last

Sidney Rosen and Abraham Tesser described the MUM effect: people are reluctant to pass on bad news. Inside organizations it shows up as filtering. Bad news gets softened at each level on its way up, or doesn't arrive at all. Being approachable in theory doesn't fix that. Reacting well the first few times someone brings you something uncomfortable does.

> Rosen and Tesser, Sociometry, 1970

08 When it gets personal

Someone is questioning your competence to others or turning a disagreement into a story about you. Handle it privately and directly, and keep it about behavior. Don't say where you heard it, don't add to it. Ask, then listen. There may be something useful in it.

SAY THIS

"I've heard you have some concerns about how I'm running the team. I'd like to hear them from you directly."

If it continues after that conversation and the person is on your team, it can become a performance conversation. See Episode 335 on handling a disrespectful employee.

09 The rumor check

Useful when side conversations have become a problem and that's been openly addressed. Add a standing 2-minute slot at the end of your team meeting. You're asking people to bring concerns into the open, where you can answer them, instead of building a story together that might not be true.

SET IT UP

"At the end of each team meeting, let's spare 2 minutes on this: what are you hearing that we should clear up? It could be about the company, the team or anything. Anything is welcome."

WHEN SOMEONE BRINGS ONE

"Thanks for bringing that up. Here's what I know so far. Travel budget is getting cut, that's correct. Headcount is not. If I know more by Friday, I will let you know."

10 Your worksheet

Something I heard secondhand recently _____

Bucket: ☐ Decisions ☐ Fairness ☐ The future ☐ Me

Check: ☐ Personal ☐ Consistent ☐ Would survive a direct question

A decision I never fully explained _____

What I'll say about it, and when _____

Who I'll ask in my next one-on-one _____

11 Try this week

1. **Explain one decision before anyone asks**
   Pick a decision you made recently and never fully explained, and walk your team through your reasoning in your next team meeting.

2. **Ask yourself 3 questions**
   When your team talks about you, how much is filling in something you never explained? Who on your team would tell you directly if something wasn't landing, and what have you done to make that easier? A year from now, what do you want the hallway version of you to sound like?

Keep going

The Leadership Accelerator is Archova's 12-week program for new and early-stage managers. You strengthen your awareness of what kind of leader you are and what your people need from you, build a leadership system with frameworks you can use every week, and learn to manage up and across with executive presence and influence.

archova.org/leadership-accelerator **Book a Leadership Strategy Call** **Watch Episode 337**