

6 Reasons Employees Keep HR Out of the Loop



A whopping **85% of employees** say they'd hesitate going to HR for a work-related issue, with 86% saying they're flat-out afraid of the department as a whole. And their "feelings are valid," says Vanessa Brulotte, Employee Relations Partner at BambooHR and host of **HR Unplugged**.

"If you're an employee experiencing this fear of HR, or if you've had unfavorable past experiences with HR, **your feelings are valid**. Coming forward with a complaint or allegation is a daunting prospect, especially when dealing with an unpredictable colleague where safety concerns are a real possibility."

Vanessa Brulotte | Employee Relations Partner | BambooHR

As an HR pro tasked with protecting your employees and the company from harm and liability, you need to know about the things that pose a threat. But you can't fix what you don't **measure**, and you certainly can't fix what you don't even know is an issue to begin with!

"Past negative experiences, where individuals felt unsupported or even 'burned' by HR, can certainly contribute to the hesitation to approach us for support," says Vanessa. "However, I believe the most significant factor is fear—the fear of retaliation, of losing safety or privacy. ... Coming forward with a complaint or allegation is a daunting prospect."

That's why cultivating a **dynamic of trust**, transparency, and **open communication** between your department and employees is so good for business. When people keep things from HR for any reason, workplace issues are left to fester beneath the surface like magma building pressure under a volcano.

Don't wait for the top to blow. Learn why employees aren't coming to HR when they should and what you can do to flip the script.

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What does HR need to know?

Everything—just kidding! **Looming over** your people leaders and their direct reports like Big Brother is not the goal here, but you do need to know about anything going on behind the scenes that can create problems for the company downstream.

This includes:

- **Labor law violations**
- **Employee misclassifications**
- **Problems with time theft, payroll, benefits, etc.**
- **Discrimination, harassment, and other code of conduct violations**

LABOR LAW VIOLATIONS

These are breaches of federal, state, or local laws concerning employment, such as wage disputes (e.g., unpaid overtime, **minimum wage violations**), unsafe working conditions, or improper leave management under acts like **the FMLA**.

HR's role

It's HR's responsibility to understand and **ensure compliance** with labor laws to protect both employees' rights and the company from **costly legal repercussions**. When made aware of a potential violation, HR must **investigate**, make corrections, draft, refresh, or re-implement compliant policies, and if necessary, work with legal counsel to address past non-compliance.

EMPLOYEE MISCLASSIFICATIONS

When employees are **incorrectly categorized** (e.g., classified as an **independent contractor** when they should be an **employee**, or as **exempt** from overtime pay when they should be **non-exempt**), they can lose out on rightful benefits and legal protections, and the company is exposed to financial penalties.

HR's role

HR is responsible for **classifying** employees correctly based on legal guidelines. If a misclassification is identified, HR must correct the employee's status, adjust payroll and benefits accordingly, and ensure future classifications are in line with regulations.

“Always remember the ‘three-legged stool’ of HR: the company, its leaders, and its employees. **It's our responsibility to actively monitor and ensure all three legs are standing strong.** If we neglect to consider the needs or wellbeing of even one of these legs, the entire stool will fall.”

Vanessa Brulotte | Employee Relations Partner | BambooHR

PROBLEMS WITH TIME THEFT, PAYROLL, AND BENEFITS

Falsified hours, unauthorized extended breaks, **payroll errors** that lead to over- or underpayment, and benefits deduction errors are all issues HR needs to be aware of—anything to do with ensuring accurate compensation and enforcing the policies and processes that protect the company's personnel investment.

HR's role

HR designs and implements clear **time and attendance policies**, often leveraging **robust time-tracking systems** to prevent and detect time theft. They're also responsible for enforcing disciplinary measures for employees who are found to be abusing timekeeping systems.

For payroll errors, HR works closely with finance to investigate discrepancies, make necessary adjustments, and ensure accurate and timely compensation. HR's intervention maintains fairness and financial integrity within the organization.

DISCRIMINATION, HARASSMENT, AND OTHER CODE OF CONDUCT VIOLATIONS

Inappropriate, illegal, or unethical behavior on the part of employees or leaders can range from overt discrimination or harassment to conflict of interest and workplace safety violations, and it's all within the purview of HR to intervene. These behaviors create a hostile, inequitable, or dangerous work environment, and can expose the company to lawsuits.

HR's role

HR is responsible for establishing and enforcing clear anti-discrimination and anti-harassment policies, **conducting training**, and providing safe channels for reporting. Upon receiving a report, HR must conduct thorough, impartial investigations, take appropriate **disciplinary action** against offenders, and implement measures to prevent recurrence, safeguarding a respectful and inclusive workplace culture.

HR is also responsible for outlining other **code of conduct policies** that protect the company's reputation and ensure fair business practices.

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6 reasons employees aren't going to HR

The goal isn't to micromanage your people, be everywhere at once, or put a finger in every pie, but to become approachable enough that you're the top-of-mind resource for employees when pertinent issues arise.

So why isn't that the case already?

We'll address each of the following reasons employees keep HR out of the loop and offer practical tips for spreading procedural awareness and building or **re-building trust**:

1. The employee fears **retaliation** from individuals or the company if they speak up.
2. They've had negative experiences with HR in the past.
3. They've bought into **negative stereotypes** about HR.
4. The employee doesn't fully understand **HR's role**, or know that it's HR's job to address the issue they're experiencing.
5. They don't know when they should go to HR about something.
6. They don't understand the reporting process, or there's not a way to anonymously report an issue.

We hope this information helps you stay on top of any situation that could jeopardize the stability of the "three-legged stool" of HR: the company, its leaders, and its employees.

1: Employees fear retaliation

We recently updated our **Bad Boss Index** and learned that 72% of employees would prefer to resolve issues they may be having with their manager directly with said manager, and roughly one in three (31%) would prefer going directly to HR. But **more than half (59%) worry about retaliation** regardless of who they go to first, and 47% think going to HR can lead to retaliation.

Retaliation can be overt and look like a sudden demotion, reduction in hours or pay, undesirable shift or task assignments, unfair performance reviews, or even outright termination. Or it can be subtle, like ostracization, reduced opportunities, or increased scrutiny over one's work.

Either type of retaliation can feel difficult to prove not just procedurally, but emotionally too, even if the employee knows they are protected by policy or law—14% would rather just start looking for another job than go through the trouble and additional trauma of reporting.

In addition to the fear of retaliation, "there's also the legitimate worry that reporting an issue could lead to uncomfortable tension with peers or leaders," says Vanessa, and that may be enough of a potential consequence to dissuade someone from speaking up.



“It’s crucial to have clear, accessible policies readily available to all employees. Ensure employees understand these policies, including the protections they offer and the behaviors that are not tolerated. **Familiarize yourself with all policies** to identify potential violations and guard against retaliation.”

Vanessa Brulotte | Employee Relations Partner | BambooHR

WHAT HR CAN DO

- **Establish and clearly communicate anti-retaliation policies:** Beyond just having a policy, actively educate employees about its existence, what constitutes retaliation, the consequences for those who engage in it, and how to report it. This should be part of onboarding and regular training.
- **Ensure confidentiality (where possible):** While complete **anonymity** isn’t always feasible for **investigations**, HR should commit to protecting the identity of the reporting employee as much as it’s legally and practically possible to do so. Explain when and why their identity might need to be revealed, and assure them that their information will only be shared on a need-to-know basis.
- **Lead by example and empower managers:** Train managers on the importance of anti-retaliation, and equip them with the skills to handle employee concerns respectfully, without bias or retribution. Leadership at all levels must model behavior that supports **open communication**.
- **Take all claims of retaliation seriously:** When an employee reports retaliation, investigate it with the same rigor and impartiality as the original complaint. Taking swift and appropriate action sends a powerful message that the company stands by its anti-retaliation stance.

2: Employees have had bad experiences with HR

As the saying goes, “Once burned, twice shy.” Employees who’ve been let down by HR in the past will hesitate to go to HR in the future, even at a totally different company.

HR happens to be one of those fields in which even an honest mistake or error in judgment can have a cascading negative effect. And even if you do your job perfectly, the outcomes can still leave certain parties unsatisfied or upset.

However, many employees have legitimate **reasons not to trust HR**, and work-related forums across the internet are filled with word-to-the-wise warnings to others not to trust HR, either. It’s a tough stigma to beat, but it’s possible to overcome these negative impressions and experiences with positive ones, one employee at a time.

PROBLEMS WITH TIME THEFT, PAYROLL, AND BENEFITS

- **Acknowledge and validate past experiences (without dwelling):** While you don’t need to take the blame for others’ past mistakes, validating employee distrust can be a powerful first step. Phrases like, “We understand that past experiences with HR, here or elsewhere, haven’t always been positive for everyone, and we’re committed to doing better,” can open the door for communication.
- **Prioritize transparency in processes:** Demystify HR’s role by clearly communicating how investigations are conducted, what **policies** are in place, and what the typical timelines for resolution are. Explain the “why” behind decisions where appropriate and legally permissible, even if the outcome isn’t what an employee hoped for.
- **Deliver on promises:** Consistency is key to building trust. If HR commits to investigating an issue, following up, or providing resources, ensure those promises are met promptly and thoroughly.
- **Cultivate an empathetic and approachable demeanor:** Encourage all HR team members to be active listeners, approachable, and non-judgmental. Create an environment where **employees feel comfortable sharing concerns** without fear of being dismissed or having their issues minimized. **Regular, informal interactions** can help break down perceived barriers.
- **Invest in continuous training and development for HR staff:** Ensure the HR team is not only well-versed in policies and legal compliance but also skilled in **conflict resolution**, active listening, de-escalation, and empathetic communication. A highly competent and compassionate HR team is the best advertisement for its value.
- **Seek employee feedback on HR services:** Ask for **feedback** on how HR is performing by adding a few HR-specific questions to existing satisfaction surveys, or through other **anonymous surveys**, suggestion boxes, or employee focus groups. **Act on this feedback** to make demonstrable improvements, showing employees their input is valued and leads to change.

“Some employees view HR as merely an anonymous complaint box—a place to register an issue to build a record without expecting or desiring further action. However, this highlights a crucial gap in understanding HR’s actual role and legal obligations.”

Vanessa Brulotte | Employee Relations Partner | BambooHR

3: Employees believe negative stereotypes

Stereotypes are rarely flattering. And when employees believe the stereotypes about HR, they’re less likely to report issues. Some of the top HR stereotypes include:

1. **The Company Lackey**
2. **The People Police**
3. **The Gatekeeper**
4. **The Business Amateur**
5. **The Model Citizen**
6. **The Dictator**
7. **The Double Agent**
8. **The Terminator**
9. **The Social Butterfly**
10. **The HR Lady**

Whether it’s due to personal experience or from being inundated with word-of-mouth HR horror stories, employee distrust gets in the way of productive connection and collaboration—and keeps HR in the dark about issues they really should know about. Luckily, there are specific actions you can take to challenge and subvert each one.

PROBLEMS WITH TIME THEFT, PAYROLL, AND BENEFITS

- **The Company Lackey stereotype:** Take every opportunity to emphasize and demonstrate how HR works with other employees (you’re an employee, too, after all) to reach shared company goals.
- **The People Police stereotype:** Focus on the “why” of policies, especially as you champion a **positive company culture** through recognition and social events. This can help you counter being seen solely as the enforcer of office rules.

- **The Gatekeeper stereotype:** Become an advocate for the **candidate experience** and train your hiring managers and panel interviewers on ethical hiring practices.
- **The Business Amateur stereotype:** Learn **how to speak “data.”** Your **workforce metrics** are the bridge between your HR initiatives and business strategy. As you become the interpreter for your HR data, you’ll be able to establish yourself as a strategic partner.
- **The Model Citizen stereotype:** Be authentic and vulnerable by sharing your learning experiences, including challenges and missteps, when appropriate. You’re human too, and you’re there to support, not judge.
- **The Dictator stereotype:** Be transparent about how decisions are made, especially as a result of employee feedback, and set clear expectations for things like **performance reviews**, raise cycles, and promotion criteria.
- **The Double Agent stereotype:** Emphasize your advisory role with leadership, validate employees’ concerns, and prioritize impartiality and confidentiality in all your interactions, while being clear about what information can and can’t be kept private when talking with HR.
- **The Terminator stereotype:** Implement comprehensive **performance management** processes and be proactive about employee growth performance.
- **The Social Butterfly stereotype:** Build a well-rounded HR team with diverse personality types and communication styles.
- **The HR Lady stereotype:** This stereotype excludes **one in four HR pros**, who are men, and also introduces sexist assumptions about HR as historically-devalued “women’s work.” To counter this stereotype, set boundaries around how you are treated in the workplace and prioritize inclusive workplace practices, training, and hiring.



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experience or ensure **compliance**. This helps employees see HR as **strategic** rather than arbitrary.

- **Showcase HR's broader contributions:** Beyond problem-solving, regularly communicate about HR's positive impacts, such as new benefits programs, **professional development** opportunities, or initiatives that improve company culture. This helps counter the "Terminator" stereotype by showing HR as a source of support and growth.
- **Offer "Ask Me Anything" sessions:** Create informal opportunities for employees to directly ask HR questions about their role, policies, or general workplace dynamics. This can demystify the HR function and make HR professionals more approachable.
- **Take care of yourself:** It's emotionally taxing to feel misunderstood or unappreciated, in addition to constantly feeling like you're between a rock and a hard place. Recognize the signs of burnout, and do what you need to do to prioritize your own health and stability.

4: Employees don't understand HR's role

Employees may choose not to reach out to HR because of a skewed or incomplete understanding of HR's role in the organization, including how much influence HR actually has over company decisions and who they're most loyal to—executives or the employee.

"The Company Lackey" stereotype is a pervasive detractor. It's founded in the belief that HR isn't "for the employee." Alternatively, an employee may assume HR is obligated to take their side against the company, and then they feel burned or betrayed when HR must operate within their broader mandate to balance the needs of the company with employee support.

As BambooHR's Employee Relations Partner, Vanessa, points out, HR is responsible for maintaining the integrity of a three-legged stool, where each leg represents employees, leadership, and the company. If one leg fails, the stool topples, "impacting the stability and success of the entire organization," says Vanessa.

Despite this responsibility, HR's decision-making power is limited, as it serves primarily in an advisory capacity not just for executive leadership, but for the rest of the company's people leaders.

Explaining these nuances to employees may feel tricky, but it's necessary in building **mutual trust and understanding**.

WHAT HR CAN DO

- **Set realistic expectations through clear communication:** Use onboarding, **internal communications**, and town halls to articulate how HR serves both employees and the company. Emphasize that HR strives for fair outcomes for all parties, rather than exclusively advocating for one side. Phrases like, "HR works to balance employee needs with company goals, seeking fair and legal solutions for all involved," can be effective.
- **Highlight the "why" behind HR actions:** When policies are implemented or decisions are made, explain the underlying reasons, especially how they benefit the collective employee

"Confidentiality should be a top priority, but when discussing anonymity with employees, be transparent that it can never be 100% guaranteed. If identifiable information emerges, discuss your company's retaliation policy with them and what steps to take if they feel retaliated against."

Vanessa Brulotte | Employee Relations Partner | BambooHR

5: Employees don't know when to go to HR

Beyond not understanding HR's overall purpose, many employees simply may not know when a situation warrants HR intervention. This uncertainty can lead to minor issues escalating, or significant concerns remaining unreported, simply because employees are unsure if their problem is "HR-worthy."

Employees might feel their issue is too trivial, or worry that HR's involvement could somehow make matters worse—remember, 47% of employees believe that going to HR could lead to retaliation.

“The types of issues employees face vary greatly in severity,” says Vanessa. “For less serious concerns, such as personality clashes between colleagues, disagreements with leadership’s business strategies, or systemic departmental issues, your direct leader or skip-level leader are often the best first point of contact to work toward a resolution.”

For issues that can’t be resolved independently, however, that’s when HR should be invited to step in, “particularly concerning workplace safety or policy violations like harassment or discrimination,” Vanessa clarifies.

But employees need to be familiar with company policy before they can identify violations.

“Employees should be able to refer to your employer handbook for a comprehensive understanding of company policies,” says Vanessa. “And when they do approach HR, they should be prepared to provide documentation (e.g., texts, call recordings, emails) and identify any witnesses who observed the behavior they’re describing.”

A lack of clarity around these thresholds and reporting requirements can be a significant deterrent for employees, but there are direct actions you can take to get everyone on the same page.

WHAT HR CAN DO

- **Empower employees for self-resolution (when appropriate):** Advise employees on how to **handle minor issues** independently when it’s reasonable, rather than HR stepping in for every conflict. This gives employees a sense of control and prevents HR from being seen as parental or solely punitive.
- **Emphasize managerial first-contact (and HR’s role in supporting managers):** **Train** managers to handle initial employee concerns effectively and explain to employees that their manager is often the best first step for many issues. Clearly communicate that HR is there to support managers in resolving these issues or to step in if a manager can’t or doesn’t appropriately address a concern.
- **Host informational workshops or webinars:** Periodically offer sessions (in-person or virtual) where HR explains its role, provides examples of reportable issues, and answers questions. These interactive sessions can be highly effective in demystifying the process.
- **Promote the employee handbook as a key resource:** Continuously encourage employees to consult the **employee handbook** for policies and procedures. Highlight specific sections related to reporting concerns and conflict resolution.
- **Communicate what information to prepare:** As Vanessa suggests, advise employees on what kind of documentation or information is helpful when reporting an issue to HR.

5: Employees don’t know when to go to HR

Even after an employee realizes they should go to HR, the next hurdle can be a lack of clarity around how to report it, especially if they may want to stay anonymous.

Anonymity is a tricky thing to guarantee, however, especially for serious allegations like harassment or discrimination. Vanessa explains that when such issues are reported—even with a request for no action—it puts the company in a tough spot. Companies have a due diligence obligation to investigate serious allegations.

“If these complaints are documented but not thoroughly addressed, the company risks being seen as negligent, especially if incidents recur,” says Vanessa. “HR cannot simply choose not to investigate; if a policy violation is reported, they have a legal and ethical duty to conduct a thorough review.”

While **anonymous reporting tools** exist, Vanessa cautions that “anonymity in reporting isn’t always guaranteed, particularly as an investigation progresses. Thorough investigations may inadvertently reveal identities, despite HR’s best efforts to maintain confidentiality.”

Furthermore, anonymous reports often suffer from a lack of detail. “If someone writes, ‘Sam is a horrible human being, is mean to everyone on the team, and shouldn’t work here anymore,’ that doesn’t give HR enough to go on,” says Vanessa. “And if the complainant is unwilling to engage and provide further information, HR may not be able to proceed.”



WHAT HR CAN DO

- **Demystify HR processes:** Create accessible guides or FAQs that outline common HR processes, such as how **investigations** are conducted, who is involved, and what employees can expect. Knowing the “how” can reduce anxiety and build confidence in HR’s impartiality.
- **Provide training on escalation paths:** Educate employees on the proper chain of command and how to escalate issues if they are not resolved by their direct leader, or if the issue involves their direct leader. This builds confidence in a structured process.
- **Establish multiple, clear reporting channels:** Offer various avenues for reporting, including direct contact with HR, management, and a dedicated, clear anonymous reporting system (e.g., an ethics hotline, online platform). Ensure employees know exactly where to find and how to use each channel.
- **Educate on the nuances of anonymity:** Be transparent about the benefits and limitations of anonymous reporting. Explain that while HR will protect confidentiality to the greatest extent possible (i.e., only looping people in on a need-to-know basis), effective investigation of serious issues may require more detail than anonymous reports typically provide. Outline scenarios where an anonymous report might not lead to full resolution due to lack of information.
- **Specify what information is needed for an effective report:** Provide a checklist or guide on the essential details to include when reporting an issue, such as dates, times, specific incidents, names of involved parties, and witnesses. This empowers employees to provide actionable information, whether anonymous or identified.
- **Conduct regular awareness campaigns:** Periodically remind employees about reporting procedures, anti-retaliation policies, and the availability of HR as a resource. Use different formats (email, intranet, team meetings) to ensure the message reaches everyone.

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