

Why Employees Don't Trust HR

(AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT)



Do your coworkers ever seem...withholding?

Maybe it takes your HR team a lot of digging to get a full answer to important questions.

Maybe HR initiatives are met with a tepid response and a lot of side-eye.

And maybe you're noticing that other employees are just plain skittish when they're around you.

If any of that sounds familiar, your HR team has a trust problem.

Trust is a prevalent issue in the workplace: only around **1 in 3 executives** report that their company trusts people to make decisions within their teams, and only 54% of HR leaders say they have a culture of genuine care.

Much of employees' distrust at work is focused on HR. Online forums are filled with tales of HR betrayals and **warnings** against trusting HR workers. With accusations of HR pros being "**smiling assassins**," it's unsurprising that HR has a hard time getting employees to warm up to them.

Distrust in HR has real consequences for employees and companies. Your team can't be effective if other teams won't collaborate with you, and employees will miss out on an important workplace resource if they don't **feel safe** reporting issues.

Read on to learn some of the most common reasons why employees don't trust HR—and how you can reassure employees and build bridges throughout your organization.

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Employees don't know what to expect from HR

Fear: HR isn't really on your side. If you go to HR, they'll turn against you.

When employees are confused about HR's function, they view HR as a wild card: You're unpredictable and can't be trusted with sensitive matters. This tension mostly comes down to a misunderstanding about who HR serves.

For someone outside the field, it's easy to assume that HR is supposed to advocate exclusively for employees. After all, HR has a lot of employee-facing functions, like managing **benefits enrollment** or handling **workplace complaints**. Unfortunately, this misconception often undermines an employee's relationship with HR.

Expecting HR to automatically be on their side will inevitably lead to employees feeling betrayed and disappointed. That disappointment can lead to an overcorrection, with employees believing that HR is never on the worker's side and instead serves as an agent for managerial abuse. Employees will discourage each other from bringing up personal issues or advocating for their needs, warning that HR could use the information against them.

Reality: HR professionals work hard to balance the needs of the company with employee support, enforcing policies and advocating for fairness.

HR serves the entire company, not just the needs of specific employees. If an employee expects otherwise, they probably won't have a great experience with HR. But that doesn't mean HR isn't on the side of employees—**employee wellbeing** is an integral part of a company's success, and it's HR's responsibility to preserve relationships and support staff through complex situations.

An effective HR pro won't view a **conflict** as one side versus another; they'll approach the problem holistically, seeking a solution that's fair, legal, and constructive. HR may ask an employee to compromise or be open to another colleague's perspective, but there's rarely a case where HR would actively work against an employee's best interests.

Try this

- **Set realistic expectations:** **Clearly communicate** your role, explaining how your responsibilities align (or don't align) with the employee's request. Express even-handed support with a phrase such as, "HR will work with you and the other team members involved to find a fair outcome."
- **Practice empathy:** Show care and understanding for employees' feelings regardless of whether you can support their request. Even small gestures can help an employee feel more heard in a **difficult conversation**.
- **Stay out of it when you can:** HR doesn't need to **micromanage** every minor problem. If an employee comes to you with an issue that can be addressed without HR oversight, advise them on how to handle it themselves. This will give employees more control over the outcome and protect HR from being seen as "taking sides."

Employees are experiencing a negative culture

Fear: HR won't help you if you complain about workplace misconduct because HR enables the bad behavior.

Witnessing coworkers or **leaders behave badly** without receiving any apparent consequences, even when someone goes to HR, is a guaranteed way to breed distrust. If complaints about **misconduct** are never addressed, employees will eventually stop speaking up.

Employees might think HR is unaware, unwilling, or powerless to address issues. Your **internal investigation process** may lack credibility, meaning employees won't bother coming forward when they experience **harassment** or discrimination.

It may even seem like HR is okay with the bad behavior. Employees will assume that if HR won't do anything to stop it, HR must not really care about having a safe and positive workplace. Distrust in HR's ability to protect employees can often spread to a general distrust in HR, making any policy or initiative that comes from the HR team inherently unreliable.

Reality: HR can advise on what steps to take, but individuals are accountable for **doing the right thing**.

Odds are, if there's a **culture problem**, HR is struggling just as much as the rest of the employees. As an HR pro, you may find yourself **coaching managers** on how to better **address performance issues** or handle conflict.

While you can document what was discussed and even warn that bad behavior could impact their future at the company, the manager still has free will—you can't force them to take your advice.

Those coaching conversations usually happen in private, so employees have no way of knowing how HR is addressing the situation. This is where **confidentiality** can put HR in a tricky spot: you'd love to reassure employees that you're advocating for them, but you can't share the details.

A **problematic leader** may also put the burden on HR to handle conflicts on their behalf. If HR is constantly being used as a bad-news messenger, it's understandable that employees think you're in cahoots with **toxic management** and an enabler of **bad company culture**.



Try this

- **Educate employees on who's accountable:** Make it clear to employees that everyone—from individual contributors to executives—is personally responsible for following company conduct policies. Use language like “HR advised” or “HR reminded” to distinguish the stance of HR from any attitudes that could be inferred from an employee's poor actions.
- **Promote a culture of kindness:** Create events and initiatives through HR to **heal low morale** and encourage a kinder, healthier workplace culture. Some ideas include **employee recognition programs**, **team-building activities**, and an in-office **mindfulness workshop**.
- **Audit your reporting process:** **Review your company's process** for receiving and **investigating** employee complaints. Look for any gaps in the system that might leave serious issues unreported, as well as any vulnerabilities for bias.

Your workplace has a gossip problem

Fear: If you confide in HR, gossip about your situation will spread to the rest of the office.

Does your HR ship have any leaks? It's a common workplace anxiety that any sensitive information shared with HR will become grist for the office rumor mill. And this fear isn't unfounded: online forums are filled with horror stories of HR spilling the beans on employees' health issues, harassment complaints, and **workplace romances**.

If your **company culture** struggles with gossip or drama, it makes sense for an employee to hold back information from HR. Nobody wants their privacy to be violated, especially when it can expose them to ridicule or harassment.

At the very least, gossip from HR will cause an employee some embarrassment. But in the worst-case scenario, a leaked HR complaint can lead to a **retaliation case**. In fact, **more than 3 in 4 employees experience retaliation** after speaking up about a management issue.

Reality: A competent HR team will stick to their confidentiality policy and take measures to address any harmful workplace gossip.

Employees aren't wrong to be worried about gossip at work. Every HR pro has to deal with workplace rumors at some point, whether you're mediating an office conflict, **managing a major organizational change**, or addressing a privacy breach.

But contrary to employees' anxieties, a good HR team tries to avoid negative gossip at all costs. If HR is ground zero for a lot of office rumors, it's a disaster for the company. Negative workplace gossip harms employees' **mental wellbeing** and **professional productivity**, and when gossip prevents employees from coming forward with important information, the company stays oblivious to serious issues in the workplace. To protect employees and keep processes compliant, HR needs to have a rock-solid **confidentiality policy** in place and proactively address any company culture red flags.

Try this

- **Share clear guidelines for HR confidentiality:** Make sure every employee knows what **information is or isn't confidential** before they say anything to HR.
- **Coach HR colleagues and leadership:** Advise HR team members and other organization leaders on how to practice discretion when discussing sensitive information. Easy tips include not talking about **private topics** in common spaces (like break rooms or open office plans) and carefully checking who is invited to a meeting before adding a confidential item to the agenda.
- **Encourage positive gossip:** Not all work gossip is bad—**positive gossip** (sharing good stories about others) helps employees bond, boosts morale, and promotes collaboration. You can **foster a culture of positive gossip** by creating opportunities for employees to give both formal and casual **recognition** for each other's achievements.

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Employees don't trust company leadership

Fear: HR works for the company—and you shouldn't trust this company at all!

Employees won't trust HR if they don't trust the company. When employees notice patterns of **poor leadership behavior**, such as **communication problems** or decisions that prioritize profit over people, the company's employer brand will quickly turn sour. Loss of trust in leadership has become a widespread challenge, with **only 1 in 5 US employees** saying they trust the leaders of their organization.

Unfortunately for HR, bad reputations can be contagious. If employees aren't happy with company leaders, they won't be happy with HR, either. Employees may think HR is complicit in the company's choices, and therefore an unreliable resource when issues arise.

And even if an employee believes that HR wants to do the right thing, they may view HR as powerless within a dysfunctional organization. As a result, whether HR is seen as part of the problem or merely an irrelevant voice in the room, employees have no faith in HR's ability to improve conditions.

Reality: HR is responsible for mitigating risk and advocating for compliance with labor laws, even when dealing with a less-than-perfect leadership team.

Sometimes the leadership's track record isn't stellar. An effective HR team understands the impact this has on employees and the overall stability of the company and will work very hard to improve a leader's reputation. This may mean advising leaders to make better choices and taking steps to repair damaged relationships.

Unless a leader is destructively incompetent, they will seriously consider input from HR, especially on important issues like **employer reputation**.

HR is also responsible for **compliance**, which means you won't be a yes-man for every C-suite decision, especially the misguided ones. It might not make HR very popular with certain people, but an HR pro is often the voice saying "No, we can't do that" or "We'll need to consult legal first."

Employees may mistake HR for an extension of the executive hive-mind, but HR plays a distinct role within the company ecosystem, advocating for the health of the company itself, not for the authority of bad leaders.

Try this

- **Focus on transparency:** Be as **transparent** as possible about HR processes and decisions. When employees better understand HR's actions, it can help build trust in the team, even when broader trust in the company is shaky.
- **Champion fairness and compliance:** Consistently demonstrate your commitment to fair treatment and ethical practices. Share improvement initiatives with employees and invite them to collaborate with the HR team if they have their own ideas on how to make the company a better place to work.
- **Be accessible:** Have an open-door policy for employees. Emphasize confidentiality and offer multiple avenues to give **feedback**, including **anonymized forms**.

Free Resource: HR Compliance Checklist

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HR is the messenger for terminations and layoffs

Fear: HR is only there to heartlessly fire people.

It's difficult to build trust with employees when HR is seen as the employment **angel of death**.

If you're viewed as the harbinger of unemployment, it's much harder to develop relationships with employees or make a meaningful impact within your organization. **Anxiety about layoffs** may lead employees to be suspicious of any information coming from HR, as well as uncertain of how their interactions with HR may impact their employment.

Some employees may project their fears in the form of personal dislike, expressing cynicism and hostility toward the role of HR. Other people may avoid HR altogether—an “if they can't see me, they can't fire me” strategy.

Reality: No one enjoys terminations or layoffs. HR is there to make sure terminations are handled legally and that any benefits or severance packages are disbursed correctly.

Firing someone isn't fun. Most HR professionals dread having to deliver that news. In fact, an HR pro is often responsible for preventing terminations, either by advising leaders against unethical or illegal termination practices, or by supporting managers in proactively **addressing performance issues**. It's also worth mentioning that processing terminations involves a lot of work—from a business perspective, it's much more efficient for HR to avoid terminations as much as possible.

Sadly, sometimes terminations or **layoffs** can't be avoided. HR doesn't make the final decision on layoffs or firings, but they are responsible for making sure they're handled properly. As an HR pro, you may find yourself the messenger for terminations, even as you share in the affected employee's disappointment.



Try this

- **Connect with employees:** Embed HR into the broader employee community. Host lunch-and learns, organize social events, and encourage HR team members to find opportunities to get to know employees as individuals. Help employees see HR as regular people, not the layoff grim reapers.
- **Showcase HR's functions:** Improve people's understanding of what HR does by creating a platform, such as a monthly newsletter, for sharing HR tips and resources. This can be a useful way to offer guidance on benefits enrollment, remind people about employee assistance programs, answer FAQs about **paychecks**, or send invitations for company events.
- **Communicate intentionally:** Once a round of **layoffs** starts (or even just a rumor of layoffs), employees will be scared. Find ways to offer empathetic, professional updates. Be as transparent as possible about the process and what employees can expect next, even if it's just a reassurance that you'll give them new information as soon as you have anything to share. If HR is perceived as honest and respectful during a layoff process, it will be much easier to repair employee relationships in the long run.

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