

(U) "Ask Zelda!": Watching Every Word in Snitch City

FROM: "Zelda," Dispenser of Advice for SIGINTers on Workplace Issues
Run Date: 09/09/2011

(U) Note: The question has been edited for brevity's sake. The below column is unclassified in its entirety.

Dear Zelda,

Here's the scenario: when the boss sees co-workers having a quiet conversation, he wants to know what is being said (it's mostly work related). He has his designated "snitches" and expects them to keep him apprised of all the office gossip -- even calling them at home and expecting a run-down! This puts the "designees" in a really awkward position; plus, we're all afraid any offhand comment or anything said in confidence might be either repeated or misrepresented.

Needless to say, this creates a certain amount of tension between team members who normally would get along well, and adds stress in an already stressful atmosphere. There is also an unspoken belief that he will move people to different desks to break up what he perceives as people becoming too "chummy." (It's been done under the guise of "creating teams.")

We used to be able to joke around a little or talk about our favorite "Idol" contestant to break the tension, but now we're getting more and more skittish about even the most mundane general conversations ("Did you have a good weekend?"). This was once a very open, cooperative group who worked well together. Now we're more suspicious of each other and teamwork is becoming harder. Do you think this was the goal?

Silenced in SID

Dear Silenced,

Wow, that takes "intelligence collection" in a whole new -- and inappropriate -- direction!

It's lonely at the top

First let me say that I do not think this manager's intent is to discourage teamwork. What it sounds like to me is that he (I'll call him "Michael") feels like an outsider and wants to be in the know. It can be lonely being the boss. You sit closed off in an office and miss the easy camaraderie with your co-workers, while at the same time feeling the need to "police" their behavior. Maybe someone told Michael there was too much chit-chat in his organization or that some specific problem existed, and resorting to snitches is his misguided way of ferreting out the culprit(s). Either that or he's been watching too much "Law and Order."

Why don't you try this: go overboard communicating with him. Call him over when he's wandering around spying on people and fill him in on things. Give him details of work projects and ask his opinion about mission matters so he feels like he's "in the loop." Get others to drop by his desk periodically just to say hello, "hope you had a good weekend," or "How 'bout them O's?" I bet that will

satisfy his need to know what's going on and he'll back off with the nosiness.

NSA=No Secrets Allowed

We work in an Agency of secrets, but this kind of secrecy begets more secrecy and it becomes a downward spiral that destroys teamwork. What if you put an end to all the secrecy by bringing it out into the open? You and your co-workers could ask Michael for a team meeting and lay out the issue as you see it: "We feel like you don't trust us and we aren't comfortable making small talk anymore for fear of having our desks moved if we're seen as being too chummy." (Leave out the part about the snitches.) Tell him how this is hampering collaboration and affecting the work, ask him if he has a problem with the team's behavior, and see what he says. Encourage him to come directly to the employee in question if he has a concern (rather than ask a third party to gather intel for him). In any case, the meeting will clear the air. Stick to the facts and how you feel, rather than making it about him ("We're uncomfortable" vs. "You're spying on us").

If, after your attempts to bring things out in the open, it becomes clear that Michael is simply evil (some people live to stir up trouble), your best recourse may be to approach Michael's boss with the problem and perhaps Michael can be reassigned. Be sure to focus on the effect it's having on the team's work when you talk to his manager.

No one likes a tattle-tale

"Silenced" implied that in this situation the snitches were unwilling accomplices for Michael. The reluctant snitches feel like they're "damned if they do and damned if they don't," and everyone else is walking on eggshells. If you are bothered by snitches in your office, whether of the unwilling or voluntary variety, the best solution is to keep your behavior above reproach. Be a good performer, watch what you say and do, lock your screen when you step away from your workstation, and keep fodder for wagging tongues (your Viagra stash, photos of your wild-and-crazy girls' weekend in Atlantic City) at home or out of sight. If you are put in the "unwilling snitch" position, I would advise telling your boss that you're not comfortable with the role and to please not ask that of you.

Trust is hard to rebuild once it has been broken. Your work center may take time to heal after this deplorable practice is discontinued, but give it time and hopefully the open cooperation you once enjoyed will return.

zelda

(U//FOUO) Editor's note: Have thoughts on this topic? Post them on the associated Tapioca Pebble.

(U//FOUO) Standard disclaimer: "Zelda's" views are her own and do not represent the official views of the Associate Directorate for Corporate Leadership, Human Resources, SID, or any other NSA organization.