

The Eavesdropping Manager

“Can I tell you my story?” says my caller. “I came in early to the office, and I overheard a colleague talking on the phone about a fellow manager whom I don't know personally. She said that for weeks she had been treated disrespectfully. She said she thinks the fellow manager is deliberately trying to make her cry. She said that he ridicules her and mocks her when they are working alone together. In meetings sometimes it is even worse. He comes late to the meetings of her team, which he is supposed to attend. He interrupts her sarcastically. He asks other people questions as if she were not there. She keeps asking him to come on time and so on; he ignores her. Yesterday he stood up at a meeting of her team, and shook his finger at her, yelling.”

She was crying on the phone and told her friend that she was going to try for a transfer to Dallas.

“I am going crazy,” says my caller. “I called HR, though fortunately I did not mention anybody's name—including not my own. They said I should immediately tell them who it is, and they in turn should institute a fair, prompt and thorough investigation. So I went back to my colleague to talk with her. She pleaded with me to keep my mouth shut. She said it would be ‘his word against hers.’ She is very much afraid that somehow he will get back at her. She is desperately worried about anyone else hearing about this.

“We talked about it again at lunchtime. She said she did not want to get anyone in trouble, she did not want an investigation, all she wants is to get back to work. She was unbelievably upset with me for eavesdropping. She says there is nothing that anyone can do, and that I have to keep quiet about this until she can try to get out. She was totally against the idea of going to talk with some strange person in HR whom she doesn't even know. She is really worried about getting a reference because she wants to transfer. I am worried that she — or he — might sue me if I tell anyone. And what happens if there is an investigation, it turns out there is not enough evidence to prove he harassed her, my colleague's career is ruined, and both my colleagues hate me? On the other hand, a recent Team Management workshop instructs me to think of my teammates as one group of my own personal ‘customers’. I am supposed to act “responsibly” if I think someone is being treated unprofessionally. Can you help me? What should I do?”