

Manager-Employee Confidences: A Bad Idea

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As a manager, establishing close professional relationships with your direct reports may be considered “desirable”—and interacting with colleagues outside of work “acceptable”—but you must always be clear that there are no separate “on the record” and “off the record” times of day. That’s because, by definition, a manager runs the organization *on behalf of its owners or investors*—meaning so long as the manager draws a paycheck, he or she is the *face of the company* and his or her *fiduciary duty* is to the business.

In a “good” working environment, employees are skilled, proficient, polite and respectful to one another. It’s also a common notion that the mood, tone, or culture of an office is set by the manager. If the manager is nervous or uncertain, those below him or her tend to be on edge. If the manager is relaxed and confident, frequently this will be reflected in the way others conduct themselves. What time managers arrive at work, how they dress, the way they communicate with colleagues and patients, and the manner in which they handle their own responsibilities set expectations for all other employees. When managers act as professionals, they bring strong ethics, values, and decision making to their jobs. The same holds true for the way managers conduct themselves outside of work, particularly around colleagues.

An effective urgent care center must have all employees on the same page. In an environment where people work closely together, often for long periods of time, it’s natural that they will become close and build friendships, which may extend outside the center. Managers should be able to have social interactions too. But as a manager, whether it’s in the workplace or at the coffee shop or in an employee’s back yard, any information that is disclosed by employees about the business must be taken seriously and acted upon if necessary. This means that managers cannot offer confidentiality to employees. Opening the door to a line of communication that the manager is unable to use when rendering a decision creates a situation in which a manager cannot effectively do his or her job.

What happens if an employee tells a manager—under the guise of confidence—about an illegal or unsafe act? That another employee is stealing, that sexual harassment is taking place, that a provider is committing fraud—whatever the issue is—is the manager now silenced? Permitting “off the record” discussion could put a manager in a scenario in which the manager’s choices are to jeopardize employee trust or fulfill his or her duty to the business. As Table 1 illustrates, it’s perfectly fine to encourage candor and openness. But if asked for confidentiality, the manager must explain in a considerate manner that in order to treat everyone fairly, and fulfill his or her responsibilities to the business, that there is no promise of confidentiality. In addition, any past offers of confidentiality are necessarily invalid.

So whether you’re the boss of one, or of hundreds, the job of the manager is to look after the business and create an environment where those who work there understand and respect the company and its goals. By being upfront and clear from the start about the rules, regulations, and goals of the urgent care center, there is no gray area for employees to “think” that confidentiality with managers exists. It should be clear that the manager is reasonable, responsible, and fully devoted to the business and its interests. Sometimes being in charge is not the easiest way to make friends, however, there is a reason you have been handed the responsibility to run the business. You’re qualified, capable, and willing to enforce the rules and make difficult decisions.

Table 1: How to respond to employee requests to go “off the record.”

If an employee asks a manager to keep something “in confidence,” the manager must remember that his/her fiduciary duty is to the company. The manager cannot be put in a situation of putting the needs of an employee above those of the business. When faced with this situation:

- Politely decline, stating your rationale.
 - For example, “I cannot assure you confidence because as your manager, anything you share with me you’re sharing with the company.”
- If appropriate, give a brief example to reinforce your position.
 - “If you were to tell me about something taking place that’s illegal or unsafe, I would have to act on it. I don’t think you would want to put me in a situation of having to choose between keeping your trust and doing the right thing for the business.”
- Encourage the employee to candidly speak what’s on their mind.
 - “Although I cannot assure confidentiality, I still want to know what you’re thinking. Having an open door policy to hear whatever concerns you have is very important to our center’s culture of teamwork.”

When a manager in an urgent care center is also an owner—including physician-investors who work in the center—he or she should adhere to the same principles and methods as a “hired” manager. When it comes to the fallout of improper managerial actions, there is no immunity for owners.