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Meet the Nicheperts

A HOST OF PINPOINT CONSULTANTS ARE HELPING WORKERS LEARN TO TRUST THE COMPANY, SHUT UP AND GET HAPPY

By FRANCINE RUSSO

Do your co-workers find the rumor du jour hard to resist? Is your office laced with backbiting and backstabbing? April Callis of Springboard Consulting says she has the cure: Gossip Stoppers. The East Lansing, Mich., trainer has given this half-day workshop 30 times this year at infected workplaces like hospitals and universities and is now fielding requests from corporations.

At an anxious time when job stability seems a distant memory, Gossip Stoppers is just one of a host of pinpoint-focused consultancies tapping into a pervasive yearning for equilibrium. Is your trust busted? They'll fix it. Too many sourpusses on staff? Likability training will sweeten dispositions. Been putting off hiring a consultant? Good news, procrastination preventers are standing by, if only you would ... well, that's an issue, isn't it? These nicheperts are part of a growing coalition of consultants who, unlike the all-you-can-eat practices, limit their work to bite-size pieces. They range from one-person shops doing half-day workshops at \$1,750 a throw to boutique firms signing on for six-month gigs at \$200,000 or so.

With its trademarked name and playful logo, Gossip Stoppers offers treatment for that specific ill. On-site, Callis delivers analysis of gossip's causes and destructive potential, along with tips for improvement. She focuses on creating solutions rather than assigning blame, and she makes listeners responsible for stopping rumors by refusing to pass them on. Gossip Stoppers kits include paper clips to remind rumormongers to fasten those loose lips and breath mints to help them remember to sweeten what they say.

If rumors are rife, it's generally management's fault. While the bosses are waiting for every department to sign off on a decision, leaks spring, and worried staff members start spinning. "After so much downsizing," she says, "there are fewer employees left. They feel overworked, without control and in a negative spiral."

Michelle and Dennis Reina, based in Stowe, Vt., have for years researched and consulted on organizational trust issues, and this year they branded themselves the Reina Trust Building Institute. In a typical six-month stint with a company, they first define types of trust: contractual ("doing what we say"), communication (being open and honest) and competence

(trusting one another's skills).

Typically, trust breaks down when change is managed or communicated badly. In one American Express department, for example, reports human resources officer Carol Mimon, a restructuring and leadership change reduced trust and engagement among top talent. Her department worked with the Reinas to rebuild trust and hang on to top people. The Reinas' approach is a seven-step program that starts with acknowledging what has happened, then segues into taking responsibility, spreading forgiveness all around, letting go and moving on. In the current climate of restructuring, Michelle Reina says, "trust is built and broken every day. The changes and downsizing don't break the trust, but how the change is managed."

Trust is terrific, but for the Sirota group, enthusiasm is the must-have for success. The Purchase, N.Y., consultancy calls it the foundation of company morale, talent retention, productivity, customer satisfaction and even higher stock prices. The consultants pitch themselves as enthusiasm builders, using methods like creating a "partnership culture" of shared business goals and joint decision making, and job-security policies like making layoffs the last choice, not the first.

So, what's the real key? Although each of these experts proffers a different cure for a different ill, the substance of what they do overlaps. Generally, they agree that unfair or badly communicated management decisions create a workforce rife with anxiety, anger and rumormongering. "I would be very cautious about anyone viewing one factor as a key to what ails all organizations," warns Wharton management professor Sigal Barsade. "Life and organizational life are a complex network, very multicausal."

In fact, if the corporate malaise, with its many causes and symptoms, can be pictured as an elephant--that ever useful beast of analogy--then some of these folks have grasped it by the trunk, some by the tail and others by the ear. But wherever they grab on, it's the same animal: a workplace unsettled by change and uncertainty.

Those who work from the top down stand the greatest chance of effecting a systemic cure, experts agree. Nevertheless, Barsade observes, if a consultant addresses a small issue like gossip, it can make a difference. "It doesn't have to be systemwide to have an effect," she says, "or to change people's lives."

Procrastination preventer Kerul Kassel has focused on this narrow niche for three years. With her procrastinator-profiler quiz and Anticrastinate Your Way to Success program, she uncovers competing goals that she believes are the root of most people's slowdowns. She helps clients bring them to the surface and resolve them. A typical case might be a midlevel manager who falls behind because he can't delegate. He makes his boss look bad and frustrates the people under him by micromanaging them. "If you procrastinate," Kassel declares, "people don't trust your leadership."

No matter how narrow their niche, the experts insist that inspired insight or client demand dictated their particular angle. Targeting is also a good business practice. "You don't want buzzwords," says Jeff Sandefer, president of energy investment firm Sandefer Capital Partners and a founder of the Acton MBA in Entrepreneurship program. "Everyone wants to hire the expert and will pay a lot for very specific help." Some

companies love the idea of bringing in an adviser to fix one narrowly defined problem. Gossip Stoppers is a prime example. "A half day, and you leave with a couple of nuggets you can use," says Barsade enthusiastically. "How attractive is that?"

Likability trainer Tim Sanders calls this "flash consulting." "You don't want consultants crawling through your company like ants with a big bill attached," he says. "Companies like to hire a subject-matter expert." Teaching people to be more likable in the workplace--improving their "emotional talent"--is one of Sanders' niches. For each client, he consults by phone for several months, then presents one or more custom-tailored speeches with e-mail follow-up. "I speak with an author's credibility and give specific advice," he says.

Well, sure. And, arguably, likable people gossip less and others trust them more, generating enthusiasm and causing procrastination to wither. But what if anxious workers overeat and fall into a depressive spiral? What if a team leader dons saffron robes and insists that everyone chant? No doubt there's a consultant to help with that too.

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