**CAREERS CLINIC**

How should I react when a junior colleague criticises a senior?

Experts tell Adele Waters how they would tackle the awkward situation

“Before jumping in with both feet, try to find out what’s really going on. Ask questions and then listen. Is it just one junior colleague or is it all of them? Have you heard it directly or has it been reported to you—by whom? What impact is it having on the team?

“Do they have a valid grievance which they’re finding it difficult to raise through other channels? Is this the only way in which they feel they can get some control of the situation?

“Don’t jump to conclusions. You may think you know what’s going on, but by making assumptions you may miss something important. Try to understand the needs behind the behaviour—for example, they may be stressed, finding it difficult to meet the demands of the job, or feel under-supported. There may also be a serious underlying team problem that needs tackling which your junior colleague didn’t feel able to raise through other channels.

“Once you have a better understanding, you may want to approach the situation using principles from non-violent communication. This involves sharing your observations (taking care to remain non-judgmental), expressing your feelings, identifying the underlying needs, and then making some specific requests. If in any doubt about what to do, seek advice from a wise colleague or your human resources department.

“It’s wishful thinking that bad behaviour will disappear if ignored. Tackling problems in a team before they escalate will give everyone the chance that they deserve to learn, grow, and develop.”

“Emotions can flare even between close colleagues, particularly when working in stressful conditions. We’ve all probably heard, and are perhaps guilty ourselves, of the occasional negative comment. A passing remark or brief heated exchange may not seem like a big deal, but such comments can have negative consequences.

“Juniors talking to others about seniors in a derogatory way can erode trust and confidence. If, as a result, juniors are then reluctant to contact seniors, there is an inherent risk to patient safety.

“Although it can be challenging, if you hear of a colleague bad mouthing another, action must be taken to resolve it. If you’re close to the situation, objectivity may be affected—make sure you’re not being driven by emotion.

“The most efficient way to resolve the matter is often to go straight to the person. They might be able to explain or they might not realise the negative effect their comments could have. Discussion may help find out what’s really going on and help find a solution.

“In a more serious case, you should follow your organisation’s policy for raising concerns and keep in mind your professional duty to take action. There is often a power imbalance favouring seniors, but negative conduct, even bullying, can go both ways.

“Situations like this can be stressful, so it’s vital to take care of yourself. You can access support and guidance from your workplace or from others, including your medical defence organisation.”

“In these situations, understanding the context is key. What’s being described as bad mouthing could, in fact, be useful feedback for a senior colleague.

“Medicine is very hierarchical and yet we aren’t given much training in leadership. But if I were the senior colleague in question, I’d want to encourage an open conversation with my junior to ask them to share any concerns they may have.

“Depending on how I found out about the ‘bad mouthing’ I might be able to discuss it openly, saying something like, ‘I heard from another member of the team you weren’t happy about something. I’m happy for you to let me know what it was so we can work out how to improve the situation.’

“Even without naming the matter directly, it’s possible to encourage honest communication. Making time to notice what’s going well and what’s not can be integrated into ward rounds and team meetings and could be considered part of good clinical practice. Medicine is reliant on cohesive team functioning. As medical leaders, being able to model the confidence to hear the negative as well as the positive is important for those around us.

“We can’t make changes unless we can communicate openly. I welcome challenging feedback from patients and colleagues because it helps us all improve. This in turn reduces patient complaints, making everyone’s life less stressful in the long term.”

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