

Open Offices: Now You Can See How the Sausage is Made

Dear Stephen:

My company recently moved offices. We had been in a more or less traditional space with private offices, but our new space is open plan with a benching seating system. Today, I got my first taste of some of the unsavoriness I had worried about with the move. I overheard a manager speaking harshly and reprimanding a subordinate. And if that wasn't enough, the more junior employee was ripping into her manager, too. I guess you could call it an argument. I wasn't the only one that heard it either. Everyone was right there!

It made me uncomfortable, and I could tell I wasn't the only one. We have plenty

of conference rooms, and I assume they would have gone to one if they thought something like this was coming, but it seems like this bickering just broke out and got intense very quickly. The manager sounded almost cruel, and the other employee was not having it and screamed back. All the while everyone was watching.

The energy in the office changed. We all hushed up. You could not even pretend to not hear it. I now feel like I should report it to HR. I do not want to be "that person," but I think everyone should recognize how these scenes can impact productivity. I also now think of

them both differently, and it all just could have been avoided.

Like I mentioned, before this move, we all had private offices so this dynamic is brand new in our organization. Should they have run into one of the conference rooms when the argument started? I suppose so. All I know is I do not like this new open concept. Will I get used to it? Is it really any better?

Signed,

Get a Room



You can send your workplace questions to Stephen at: StephenSays@bellow.press

Questions selected to be answered, will appear in this column. Please use the Subject: Stephen Says for all emails. Stephen Viscusi is a bestselling author, television personality, and CEO of The Viscusi Group, global executive recruiters located in New York. Follow Stephen on Twitter @stephenviscusi, Like Stephen on Facebook; and follow him on LinkedIn.

Dear Get a Room:

All offices need private spaces. Even if people aren't yelling at one another, there are still plenty of conversations that should be held behind closed doors. This is especially true of contentious conversations between managers and their subordinates. Handling these situations poorly can adversely affect company morale and productivity, as you aptly describe. Most open concept office spaces have ample conference rooms so any impromptu interpersonal exchanges can be appropriately cloistered away from the company benching systems. Yet, companies need to train their employees to understand this. I think HR departments need to lead the charge, particularly when companies transition into a different work environment.

Of course, you're not the first person to have this issue, and sometimes companies with open concept offices have to deal with some discomfort. Most companies figure out how to

make the open concept work and many determine the small chance of something bad happening is Pareto dominated by the increased collaboration the benching system encourages — arguments, after all, happen in all offices.

That said, a supervisor berating a subordinate and then the subordinate yelling back is not something you want to have to watch. This sort of verbal abuse and harassment you describe is a serious issue, even if it had happened in a private conference room. If your company has a hotline for anonymous HR complaints you should definitely report it. Or, if you have a good relationship with the manager, you should let them know watching this made you uncomfortable. Let me be as clear as I can be, the behavior you are describing is very wrong — regardless of where it took place. The fact that it happened in front of the entire company is just the icing on the cake. This is an unhealthy work environment, with two people who sound like they have a toxic

relationship. The manager seems awful, and it is interesting that the subordinate gives it as good as she gets it. It sounds like a dysfunctional marriage that needs to be broken up.

Either way, the open concept office is the least of your worries. I would usually say give it a few weeks, and you'll get used to all the loud typing and chatter. It takes time, but most people end up enjoying the open plan. In your case, however, I doubt that you'll get much relief — it just won't be the office plan's fault. So long as you're at a company that hires managers and employees who air their grievances like that, angels could descend from heaven to share God's own office plan and it would still be a lousy place to work. Think of it this way, if you never moved to the new offices, you might not have known that managers at your company treated subordinates like that until it was too late. Now you know; do something about it!

Stephen