I was hired to supervise a staff who my boss had told me hadn't really been supervised for years. My boss admitted that they really did not like confrontation and I learned quickly that my boss's definition of confrontation was broad. Like almost every conversation they considered to be confrontation.

And I learned this very quickly just a couple of weeks into my new tenure in this position, when one of my staff had come to work one day wearing jeans on a day when we were not allowed to wear jeans.

My boss brought it to my attention and I told my boss I was very happy to remind the staff that they weren't allowed to wear jeans that day.

But even vicariously through me, my boss could not bear to think about the potential of what they considered to be this confrontation happening. They begged me not to address the conversation with them. They wanted to wait and see what happened, to wait and see if the problem went away on its own, as so many problems do, right? But sure enough it didn't. And a couple of days later, they came back in to work with jeans on on a day they weren't supposed to wear jeans. Again, my boss approached me and again, I offered to address the staff. Again, my boss declined.

This went on and on, and eventually my boss decided the best course of action was to address it in front of the entire staff during a staff meeting.

If you rolled your eyes or breathed a heavy sigh, you are not alone. That was my reaction. And it's the reaction of anyone who's been on the receiving end of this, whether you are the person who wore the jeans or you are the person who's sitting next to the person wearing the jeans because it's so easy to spot how terrible of a way this is to handle this situation. Yet for some reason, when we are the manager, we seem to handle situations this way.

And I'm using we not just to make you feel better if you're one of the people who has handled a situation this way, but to say, yeah, me too. I have too. Because these situations are hard. And it's not just because we're nervous and we don't want to have that one-on-one difficult conversation. There is a part of us that is looking out for that person, right?

There is a part of us that has the other person's interest in mind and ours too, that we're a little bit nervous and uncomfortable and we're trying to avoid it, of not wanting to make them feel bad, of not wanting to single them out. But of course when we take on this tactic of publicizing what should be this very private conversation, we are singling them out. And now everybody knows what could have been a very discreet, private moment that has come and gone. Certainly in a situation that is visible, something like clothing in an office that has five people in it.

Of course everybody knows who you're talking about and the person who is being talked about now feels infinitely worse than they would have felt if you just addressed the conversation one-on-one in the first place.

There are a lot of lessons to be gleaned from this moment and there are lots of moments that are like this day in and day out in organizations and with managers. But the one I want to focus on today is this idea of taking a moment that should be addressed one-on-one, whether it is a performance issue, whether it is a broken policy, whether it's a mistake that's been made, and using that moment to then address everybody and what the consequences are of that and if it's ever a good idea.

That's what we're going to talk about today. In most cases, when we as the managers and the supervisors choose to address the situations in this way, it is, not a positive.

The reason being is the way that that looks to those that we are disclosing really what should be a confidential moment though we are masking it as if we're not disclosing the name of who we're talking about or we're not giving specifics. In most cases, everybody knows exactly who we're talking about. In that way it really diminishes our credibility because it's signaling to the group we're talking about, oh, you're, disclosing this confidentiality and you are showing to us that you are not having this one-on-one.

What should clearly be a one-on-one conversation and instead are choosing to address it to the group. It's not really displaying strong leadership here. It also creates shame for the person that you're calling out because now they know you're talking about them. In most cases everybody else knows you're talking about them too. It breaks a lot of trust, certainly with the person that you're singling out and with those who bear witness to it also. And if after said incident, you choose to then create a policy, for example, based on this incident, the example I gave there was already a policy in place.

But what happens a lot of times when one person does something, the reaction by management in organizations is to then create a policy.

So the joke a lot of times is when you have like a hair dryer and they say, don't use this hair dryer while you're standing in a bathtub or something. And you think like, who would've done this? The response is, well, somebody somewhere did it. Then they created the label to tell you not to do it. There are a lot of liability reasons and that's a little bit of a different situation.

But to think about is it really necessary to create a policy because one person at some point in time, somewhere somehow did this thing? Do you now have to create a policy every time someone does something?

It's important to be extra careful if, this policy is taking something away from your other staff, things like working from home or other perks that because somebody somewhere abused a perk or a benefit or something that your staff would really appreciate or benefit from that you're depriving them of because someone somewhere abused said thing that now nobody in perpetuity can do said thing. So really being thoughtful about that.

There might be some cases where because one person did one thing that maybe it's time to think about, is it time to have a conversation with everybody?

Is it time to get something in writing? Is it a pattern that, that now that we're going to address it? Or is it potentially the start of a new pattern?

It's hard to know that ahead of time. Is this going to be like a new trend? It's hard to know that, but is this something we might want to get ahead of before it becomes the second time, third time, fourth time, fifth time...We might not know that, but is there some writing on the wall so to speak that we can start to get ahead of, is this something so egregious that we need to get something down on paper to make sure it doesn't happen again?

And is this something new like on a technology end that we want to make sure we're not lagging so far behind the technology?

But be careful that your policy manual doesn't become so thick with policies that end up just being too much for people to keep track of.

There doesn't need to be a policy for everything under the sun. Being intentional about what you have in writing and what needs to be codified for the way that you do your work and what simply needs to be a one-on-one conversation with a particular person about a particular moment in time and what could really benefit the entire group rather than something that really just needs to be addressed with one person.