

Managing Gossip in the Workplace

In the workplace, the quiet, most insidious type of betrayal can come in the form of gossip, speculation or rumour about events or others.

Gossip is no longer limited to whispered conversations around the water cooler or staff room, but can spread quickly through much larger groups, via e-mail, SMS and social media.

But what is gossip, isn't it just idle chit chat or light conversation? While idle chit-chat and other light conversation can be value neutral, gossip is often negative, inflammatory and embarrassing to the person being spoken of.

Technically, any sharing of trivial or unsubstantiated information can be considered gossip. But you have to consider the sentiment. For example, if it were rumored that a coworker is being promoted, and you discuss it with a coworker, is that gossip? If the discussion is hurtful or damaging or negative, then yes it is gossip. But if it's value neutral then it's not. Therefore if a story is told with negativity and without goodwill, then it is gossip.

An American survey conducted by Equisy, a communications organisation, stated that the average employee spends 65 hours per year gossiping at work.

Managers are encouraged not to let workplace related gossip to spread, but how? The best way is to establish open-door HR and Management functions that become a proactive 'news creator' rather than taking a reactive approach that is constantly responding to rumors with damage control.

Here are some ways Managers can reduce the spread of gossip in the workplace:

Take note of subtle changes in the workplace culture.

When your bustling workplace becomes quiet and conversations halt when you walk into a room, beware. Dispel the mystery by asking directly, 'What's going on?' Actively listen and respond calmly.

Fine-tune your 'radar' and question employees if you suspect that rumors might be developing. Rumors grow when information is scarce. Use one-on-one supervision and employee meetings to actively listen to issues that may become topics of conversation.

Nip it in the bud

If an employee comes to you complaining of gossip, be proactive. Speak to the person involved and tell them that you are aware of this behaviour. Describe how the behaviour results in others not trusting them. For some, this single statement will be a realisation that will result in immediate change. If the gossip is consistent and ongoing, incorporate the impact the gossiping employee's behaviour has had on the workplace in his/her performance evaluations. This should be incentive to stop the behaviour.

Announce upcoming changes in a timely manner where possible.

Communicate regularly and consistently with employees about what's going on in the workplace. Regular communication minimises the influence and need for gossip, because everyone is in-the-know. If employees don't have good information from the manager about what is going on, they will make it up in the form of speculation and gossip. Consistent and authentic communication will work wonders in minimising gossip.



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If you can't tell employees of changes ahead of time, then you can expect rumors to spread. Ready yourself to manage them. Stay particularly alert in situations that can foster uncertainty for employees. However be equally candid about the type of information you can (and will) share. Refuse to indulge in the rumor mill.

Head off rumors at the pass.

Establish a reputation for having an open and above board style, and encourage other managers to do the same. If employees believe you will be straight with them, they'll be more likely to come to you for answers. Include an 'office door' that is 'truly open' and you can avoid most of the problems.

Develop an 'office-gossip policy' that addresses acceptable office behaviours.

Engage you employees in developing your policy by holding group discussions and setting expectations about gossiping. This gives permission for coworkers to hold each other mutually accountable for having a gossip-free workplace.

Some easily implemented concepts include the use of questions that can be applied to conversations such as:

- Is it true?
- Is it kind?
- Is it important?,
- If it's not, then we don't listen.

Rebuilding Positive Teams

Gossip can damage team morale, increasing levels of mistrust and increase conflict. All these impact on performance and productivity. So how can you recover and build a positive workplace and a positive team?

To achieve a positive work environment, positive leaders deliberately increase the flow of positive emotions through their communication. Not just because it is a 'nice' thing to do, but because it leads to a measurable increase in team morale and a happier and cooperative work environment – which in turn helps the team achieve their work goals.

Positive Leaders

- Show empathy for their employees
- Observe and understand non-verbal communication and how it affects perceptions of what's being said.
- Set aside the time and space to really listen without distraction.
- Understand their own emotional filters that affect their perception of what is being said.
- Are motivated to listen.
- Are non-judgemental of the other person.
- Strive for accuracy.

Top tips for developing a positive workplace

Build Trust

Trust is the basic tenant for all relationships, so building an environment of trust is one of the most important things you can do to create a positive work environment. It's a philosophy that must be demonstrated in everything you and your employees does. Trust is about showing your employees that you are reliable, responsible and accountable, and that they can rely on you for consistency. It is also letting them know you expect the same from them.

Communicate Positively and Openly

In order to create a positive work environment each employee needs to feel valued. This is best accomplished through your listening to each person and honouring each one for what s/he has to say. By doing this you show that you value and respect every individual.

Create Team Spirit

One of our basic human needs is to feel we belong to something bigger than ourselves, and for many people that need is met by being part of a supportive work group. When you create team spirit and identity, employees members will see themselves as a group of people all working for a common goal, rather than a bunch of individuals competing with each other.

Be Approachable

Always present an attitude of approachability to your employees and clients/customers. Always be prepared to listen to whatever they want to share with you, and validate what you've heard. If they have concerns, tell them you will look into it and get back to them by a certain time. Then be sure you do! Connect with people - smile and make eye contact. Act in a friendly manner, call people by name and show interest in what's going on.

Avoid the Drama

Constant reactivity creates melodrama that is something you don't need in your team. It saps valuable creative energy and promotes an environment of high stress that can potentially risk the health and wellbeing of employees over a prolonged period of time. If you've been using 'crisis management' as your modus operandi, invest in learning about new management strategies, benchmark with 'new thinkers' and learn a new style. Crisis management is passé, wasteful and destructive.

References:

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