

The Danger of Workplace Gossip

It seems so harmless. The little chitchat at the water cooler about so and so. The debate over someone's relationship with someone else. The speculation about so and so.

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.

Gossip Hurts

Gossip can have many adverse side effects on an organisation, on teams and most of all on individual reputations, both the person who gossips and the those who are victim to gossip.

It's no surprise that speaking about someone without goodwill is going to increase conflict and decrease morale, resulting in strained relationships. Gossip breaks down the trust level resulting in employees second-guessing each other and ultimately running to the supervisor to clarify the directions or instructions, or to settle the differences that will arise.

Gossip brings the death of teamwork as the group breaks up into cliques and employees start refusing to work with others. Gossip results in the supervisor spending an enormous amount of time trying to figure out who said what to whom. Or, worse yet, the supervisor struggles to explain to the manager that the on-going conflicts and communication problems within the workgroup are the reason work doesn't get done only to hear the manager comment, "Why can't you manage your team better?" Productivity is lost, as are good employees who do not want to work in a toxic environment.

Breaking The Gossip Cycle

Let's say you are not a gossip. You simply listen to your coworkers so as not be rude. Here's the thing that most people don't realize—as a listener, you are a co-narrator to the gossip. In other words, the act of active listening actually supports and promotes gossiping. The more you listen, the more you encourage it. If you don't listen, the gossip has nowhere to go. Think about the last time you told a story to someone who was clearly not interested. The story probably withered on the vine.



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Tips To Get Out Of The Gossip Pipeline

1. Be busy. Gossip mongers want attention. If you're busy and preoccupied with your work, you can't be available to listen to their latest story.
2. Don't participate. Walk away from the story. Don't give visual clues that you are interested in listening. If someone passes a juicy story on to you, don't pass it any further. Take personal responsibility to act with integrity.
3. Turn it around by saying something positive. It isn't nearly as much fun to spread negative news if it's spoiled by a complimentary phrase about the person being attacked.
4. Avoid the gossipier. If you notice one person who consistently makes trouble, take the necessary actions to have as little interaction with that person as possible.
5. Keep your private life private. Be aware that if colleagues are gossiping about others, they will gossip about you, too.
6. Choose your friends wisely at work. You spend a good deal of time at work so it's natural for friendships to develop. Share information sparingly until you are sure that you have built up a level of trust. Be aware that close association with gossipers will give the perception that you are too.
7. Be direct. If you confront the person spreading the gossip and confidently tell him or her that such behavior is uncomfortable for you and other coworkers, it's likely to stop.

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 colleagues 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 communication strategies, benchmark with 'new thinkers' and learn a new style. Crisis management is passé, wasteful and destructive.

