

10 tips for dealing with workplace gossip



Unlike this classic joke, gossip can be anything but funny when it happens in your workplace. It can undermine morale and cause productivity losses. Regardless of the nature of the gossip, the following tips can help deal with the issue. The first few suggestions apply to leadership of the organization, while the rest apply to all.

1: Set the example and tone

If you're a leader or manager who wants to reduce or eliminate workplace gossip, take a look at yourself first. Are you gossiping about your own boss or peers? Are you speculating idly or complaining about future company policy? If so, don't be surprised if your subordinates do the same thing. Set the right tone and those subordinates are more likely to follow.

2: Be open to hearing issues

If your subordinates sense that you're unwilling to hear about and discuss workplace issues, gossip may result. If they believe they can't talk to you, they will merely complain to each other. If they can't get clear answers to questions, they will speculate among themselves.

3: Keep communication lines open

Be willing not only to listen to issues from subordinates, but to divulge information as well. In fact, being in front of a problem – that is, getting information to your staff about a problem first – is often better than reacting to inquiries from them. Your staff will appreciate this transparency and may gossip and speculate less as a result.

4: Don't shoot the messenger

None likes the bearer of bad news.

One certain way to foment gossip, albeit unintentionally, is to shoot the messenger. If your staff has concerns about a particular issue, they might want you to address it. However, if you reprimand or take other negative action against the person who raises the issue, you will kill any thoughts your staff might have of doing the same thing in the future. As a result, they will simply complain among themselves, causing a vicious circle of discontent and gossip.

5: Confront the gossipers

If people who gossip about you believe that doing so brings no negative

consequences, they have no incentive to stop gossiping. Conversely, if they know that you're on to what they're doing –and in particular, if you make your feelings known to them – you increase the chances that the gossip about you will stop. Not only will the gossipers get the message, but so will others who might be tempted to join in and gossip about you.

6: Deal with the issue not with the person

When you do confront someone who has been gossiping, you will come across far more professionally if you focus on the issue and behavior rather than on the person. For example, instead of saying, "You are a bad person for gossiping about me," consider saying, "I am concerned about the gossiping, and I want it to stop." This way of reacting makes you look better and more professional to anyone else who might hear about it, a fact that can help you politically.

7: Refuse to be drawn in

A good way of stopping gossip and rumors is simply to refuse to be drawn in. In other words, refuse to respond to comments about the absent person with more comments about that person. Even better, try to change the subject subtly. For example, the next time someone gossips about your co-worker Tom, try bringing up something about Tom's child, perhaps with regard to something that child has in common with your own child. Then, begin talking about the children and their common activity rather than about Tom. Most likely, the group will not even notice that the gossip has changed to something else.

8: Verify via questions

If you feel you can't avoid the gossip and you can't change the subject, at least try to verify the information you're hearing. Ask about details about places and times. Often, like the urban legends that permeate email, rumors and gossip are only general and have no specifics. By asking about details, you are subtly forcing the issue because the person who can't provide any details is tacitly acknowledging the weakness and lack of credibility of that information. Then, when the person fails to provide these details, you can just say, "Wow, all of it sounds pretty vague. Are you sure about it?" You're making it clear that you have doubts about what you are hearing without attacking the person who is telling you.

9: Focus on solutions not problems

Much gossip arises when a group of workers is concerned about a particular problem. If you sense that the conversation in your group is headed toward complaining or gossiping, remember the old adage "It is better to light a single candle than to curse the darkness." Instead of joining in with the complaining, simply ask the group what anyone thinks might be a solution. Of course, the group might not be able to come up with an answer. Furthermore, the boss might not go along with whatever the group comes up with. However, the exercise of focusing on solutions will take away from the urge to gossip.

10: Avoid self-righteousness

If you try any of these techniques, do it in a low-key manner. Don't announce or make a big deal about what you're doing. Above all, avoid being condescending or lecturing people about the evils of gossip. Doing so will only alienate your co-workers. By being casual about dealing with the gossip, you remove the problem of creating a new problem for yourself.

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