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. Is it chitchat or is it gossip? How can you tell the difference? And who cares? There is a very big difference, and it is an important one, because gossip run amok can be dangerous and destructive in the workplace.

Gossip or idle chit chat?
So how does one tell the difference between idle chatter or gossip? 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. Here is a test: Consider the impact of what is being said. Does it cast negative aspersions? Does it create rifts? Does it exult in the misfortune of others? Does it have a negative emotional charge? Does it serve to perpetuate conflict or negativity? Is it hurtful or damaging? Is it something you would say in front of that person? 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. If the story is told with negativity and without good will, then it is gossip.

Gossip hurts
Gossip can have many adverse side effects on an organization. It can increase conflict and decrease morale. It results in strained relationships. Gossip breaks down the trust level within the group, which results 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 is 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 that toxic environment.

Breaking the gossip cycle
Let's say you are not a gossiper. You simply listen to your coworkers so as not be rude. You've been taught to be a team player right? But 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.

1. Here's how to get out of the gossip pipeline:
   1. Be busy. Gossip-mongers want attention. If you're 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 gossiper. If you notice one person who consistently makes trouble, take the necessary actions to have as little interaction with that person as possible. Avoid him/her.
5. Keep your private life private. Don't trust personal information with coworkers. Remember, if they are gossiping about others, they will gossip about you, too. Don't give them ammunition.
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. Also, close association with gossipers will give the perception that you are a gossiper.
7. Be direct. If you confront the gossiper and confidently tell him or her that such behavior is making it uncomfortable for you and other coworkers, it's likely to stop.
8. Don't be afraid to go to a superior. Gossiping wastes a lot of company time and hurts morale. A company interested in a healthy work environment will value the opportunity to correct this type of situation.

What the employer can do

Gossip is as old as mankind. It is unrealistic to think we could free the workplace of gossip. It's also conducted through the free will of employees, and regulating that is very difficult without creating a big brother climate. That being said, there are some things that employers can do to minimize negative gossiping and rumormonger:

- Communicate regularly and consistently with employees about what's going on in the workplace. Regular communication minimizes the influence and need for gossip, because everyone is "in-the-know." If employees don't have good information from the supervisor 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 stopping the gossip.
- Discourage gossip in official company policy. Include a section that deals with gossip in the company handbook. Convey to your employees that such talk is injurious to morale and productivity and will not be tolerated. Ask them not to participate and not to tolerate it from others.
- Nip it in the bud. If an employee comes to you complaining of gossip, or if you know an employee to be a gossip, be proactive. Tell the offender that you are aware of his behavior. Describe how his behavior results in others not trusting them. For some, this single statement will be a realization that will result in immediate change. Furthermore, incorporate the impact the gossiping employee's behavior has had on the workplace in his/her performance evaluations.
- Incorporate employee driven group discussions and expectations about gossiping. This gives permission to coworkers to hold each other mutually accountable for

having a “gossip-free” workplace.
- As a supervisor or manager—do not engage in gossip yourself. What is good for the goose is good for the gander. What if the gossip is about you! If you are the target of gossip you have two choices. You can confront the source or make a public statement. Thankfully, gossip has a very short life span. Sometimes, the best thing to do is let it run its (hopefully) short course. Creating a stink sometimes causes more drama than just letting it go.

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