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Making the Workplace Work for You

Solving the Gossip Dilemma in the Workplace

"We are sending you on a fact finding mission to find out who said what."** This was the assignment given to me by a group of physicians who wanted the gossip in their clinic to stop. They didn't know what was being said or by whom and it was clear that they didn't have the desire or time to go through the exhausting experience of finding out.

I find it curious that often the most confident, educated, and efficient professionals have no desire, knowledge, or training on how to track down the perpetrators or origin of where the gossip began in their organization. So they bring in HR, EAP, or a mediator like me to go through the relational Rubik's Cube process to find out who said what.

For the record, every time I do a workshop called "Managing Gossip in the Workplace," someone asks me to define gossip. **"Gossip is unnecessary chatter, frequently laced with harmful intent, that is shared about another's personal life or activity that can cause damage or question their reputation without them there to defend themselves."**

Before we start our fact finding mission to discover the origin of gossip in your workplace (if it exists), let's examine a couple of myths regarding the dilemma:

Gossip Myths

1. *Only women have a problem gossiping:* Not so. I have been in multiple settings and offices where it is clear that the men have the biggest problem spreading information, to others about others, that is inappropriate and untimely. Since gossip isn't merely about communication, but driven more by insecurity and a lack of courage to confront issues directly, both genders apply.

2. *All gossip is based on a lie:* Actually, a lot of what is shared in a juicy gossip session is based on fact and truth. The problem, however, isn't the content of what is shared, but who it is shared with and the motivation behind spreading the personal information. I love this phrase that seems to say it all:

> "The real art of conversation is not only to say the right thing at the right place, but to leave unsaid the wrong thing at the tempting moment." —Dorothy Nevill

3. *Everybody gossips anyway:* Well, yes and no. Since nobody is perfect, our natural default seems to speak wrongly and inappropriately about others who are not there to defend themselves. However, there is a huge difference between being a chronic slanderer and one who, on a rare occasion, falls into it. Interestingly enough, there are corporations that actually have a ban on workplace gossip and many other organizations link the employee's gossip problem with their overall performance.

CEOs and administration all over America agree that the number one corporate enemy today is gossip among staff and management. Consider a couple of stats below:

Statistics on Workplace Gossip:

A recent survey suggested that:

- 15% of employees occasionally engaged in gossip.
- 21% of employees regularly participated in gossip.
- 86% of gossip was related to corporate challenges.
- A gossip session lasts 15 minutes on average.
- The total time wasted with gossip at work per year is 65 hours.

Thus it has been rightly stated that: "The gossip grapevine now looks like a money pit." In addition to potentially sabotaging another's character, dividing the ranks at work into cliques, and creating a culture of distrust, gossip slows down production, efficiency, and morale and, as a result, reduces revenue! No wonder some organizations that are bright and motivated put a ban on gossip.

Have you ever wondered why this form of workplace violence happens in some offices and not others? There are some indicators as to why the seeds of gossip germinate and thrive in certain environments faster.

Where Gossip Thrives

1. Gossip thrives when there are poor communication channels from the top down. You see, if management doesn't keep staff updated on changes or any other pertinent information, staff is left to figure out what's going on among themselves. A friend of mine put it this way to management: "If you don't tell your story, someone else is going to tell it for you, and you might not like the story they tell."

2. Gossip grows especially fast if it is initiated from leadership. Water runs downhill, so what usually begins at the top cascades down with greater force through the ranks. If you, as leader, want gossip to stop in the organization, you need to stop it first and model professionalism.

3. Gossip germinates in an environment when leadership allows it to continue. By the way, as a leader, your staff is watching how you are going to handle this problematic behavior. If you back away because of fear of conflict and do not nip it in the bud, staff will eventually lose respect for you and your leadership.

Obviously the common denominator has to do with leadership managing the problem in a way that contains and bans it from getting out of control.

Getting a Handle on the Gossip Dilemma

This type of gangrenous problem can only be cured and eradicated by management and the team, not just one.

Here are some ideas to help:

1. Have a script: Don't personally allow it to continue. If you are in the lunchroom and Brandon is spreading hurtful information about Andrew's personal life, say something like: "Why are you telling me this? Have you talked to Andrew? Does Andrew know you are sharing this with me? Can I quote you?" Frequently, silence can be a form of agreement or endorsement in the mind of a gossiper.

2. Use good judgment: Know this: If someone continually gossips TO YOU, they will eventually gossip ABOUT YOU. In other words, you're next. So I suggest that you distance yourself from the individual, if at all possible. And whatever you do, don't share any personal information with the gossiper.

3. Don't participate, but turn it around: Usually people that gossip are insecure and want to gather supporters to listen to their hot off the press information. Don't do it. Be closed for business. Mention something positive about Andrew or something you really appreciate about him. Eventually you won't be fun to dump on anymore.

4. Management must step in: Since gossip is actually rated as a form of workplace violence, there is no one or group better to stop it than management. It is said, "In life you get what you tolerate," so if the morale in the company is dropping, the worst thing you can do as a leader is nothing.

5. Create an office policy that bans gossip: Here is a suggested policy put into print by one organization: *"Do not participate in gossip and spreading rumors and do not tolerate it from others. Rumors and gossip sabotage the company's ability to effectively work together. It is a disrespectful, non-productive, selfishly-motivated act that can impede staff from performing their function. If you are pulled into a gossip situation, verify the accuracy of the information and refuse to pass it on to another."*

The Difference between Venting and Gossip

Everybody needs to release built up emotions regarding work once in a while. And good venting sessions can sound pretty harsh with deep undertones of frustration. The big difference between gossip and venting, however, is motivation. The people who simply need to vent are looking for ideas and solutions as to how to fix the problem. Gossipers show little to no interest in resolving the matter or helping the situation.

Conclusion

So, be a part of the solution rather than an accomplice to the problem. Go on a fact finding mission if you will, to begin the process of rooting out gossip. Anything you can do to solve the dilemma will eventually restore the morale, relationships, and trust down at the workplace. Who wants to work at a place where you have to continually look over your shoulder?

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Bill formed TeamWorks in 2001 to help organizations achieve their goals for establishing high morale and client satisfaction. TeamWorks currently specializes in offering one-on-one surveys and evaluations for management and staff to assess the current culture's needs and recommended trainings going forward.

In addition to conducting a variety of workshops and in-services on workplace issues, Bill mediates conflict among partnerships and staff relationships, speaks at conventions, facilitates management retreats, and offers personal consultation and counseling for staff.

Bill's strengths are in public speaking, mediation, and understanding the complexities of relational dynamics in the workplace. He lives in Medford, Oregon, with his wife Jenny, and enjoys spending time with their five children and five granddaughters.