



Facing Down Workplace Gossip

By Robert Bacal

Workplace gossip is a serious issue. While many of us participate in the gossip pipeline (often without really thinking about it), workplace gossip can be exceedingly damaging both to individuals and the company in general. Here are some of the destructive results of gossip in the workplace:

- Wasted time and productivity as a result of excessive time exchanging “gossip information.”
- Circulation of false rumors and either heightened fear or false raised expectations.
- Severe erosion of trust of others in the workplace.
- Severe erosion of staff morale.
- Hurt feelings and the possibility of reprisals.
- Creation of a “toxic” work environment.

These are serious outcomes. Gossip can and should be dealt with from at least two “angles.” Management staff can play a role in facing down workplace gossip, as can individual employees. When both management and employees actively try to cut down the gossip, the results can be surprisingly positive.

For Managers and Supervisors

Managers and supervisors can “take on gossip” in a number of ways.

First, when people approach you with gossip to share, make it clear that you aren’t interested in hearing it. Here’s a sample response: “I don’t think it’s productive or fair to talk about people like this when they aren’t present. So if we can’t talk about something else, then I have to get back to work.”

Second, make it clear to staff that gossip is not appropriate in your department. You can do this at staff meetings through firm but gentle “announcements.” Explain the damage that can be done through gossip. However, you need to walk the talk. If you want gossip to stop, you must stop participating in it.

Third, improve communication about workplace issues. Gossip (or sometimes grapevine information) tends to occur when there is a vacuum of information. In the absence of official information, people speculate, or circulate rumors. By keeping staff better informed and being more open about workplace issues, you can remove the need to create false information to fill the information gap.

Finally, if you identify one or two people who are at the forefront of the gossip-mill, you may need to talk to them individually, and privately. Explain the damage and problems caused. Explain that while spreading gossip seems harmless, eventually the gossips themselves will become victims of it. If the problem continues, you may need to make this a performance issue, since it can affect productivity, and team cohesiveness and effectiveness.

For Employees

Believe it or not, employees can exert a strong anti-gossip force in the workplace. Gossip can be reduced if even a small number of employees decide to face it down.

As with managers, the main tool here is to “not play.” Gossips thrive on people willing to listen to the gossip. Cut off the listening, and participation of others, and the gossip drops. You can indicate you do not want to deal with gossip, and that you will remove yourself from situations where gossip occurs. You may find that doing so will bring out other “anti-gossipers” who will follow your lead. Here’s an example of what to say: “I don’t want to rain on the parade, but I’m not comfortable with this conversation. I’d rather not hear who’s doing what to whom, since we don’t know the facts. So, if you guys want to talk about this, I think I’ll just move on and do something else.”

Notice that this isn’t an attack on the gossips, but a straight expression of personal preference. If people challenge you on this statement, don’t argue. You’ve said your piece and there is no need to explain beyond that point. Don’t lecture, and don’t berate. Just move on.

If you have a concern about gossip, consider talking to your manager or supervisor about it.

Often management may not be aware it is taking place, particularly if they are “out of the gossip loop.” Explain the situation generally (don’t gossip yourself), without mentioning specific people. Ask if the manager might be able to step in or remind people of the destructiveness of gossip. Don’t wait until you become the gossip victim. If you feel there is too much gossip going around, your concern will be much more credible if you don’t wait until it affects you directly.

"Gossip is destructive whether you are the target, or whether someone you don't like is the target."

Conclusion

Facing down gossip is a surprisingly straightforward process, and it’s an area where individuals can accomplish a great deal on their own. Remember that even people who engage in gossip (perhaps out of habit) know it’s a bad thing. They may respond positively to a reminder, whether it comes from a manager or an employee. And above all, keep the following in mind. In high gossip workplaces, eventually, everyone will be the subject of gossip. Perhaps this week it’s Fred, and next week it’s Ann, but sooner or later, it IS going to get around to YOU.

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