

Workplace gossip and its effects

We're all prone to discussing the boss' latest decision, complaining about a difficult co-worker or speculating on who will get promoted next. But when is something healthy office camaraderie and when is it toxic?

Gossip can actually be a good thing. When it's positive – an announced pregnancy, a new project or promotion – it builds co-worker bonds and can foster teamwork and engagement. On the other hand, when office talk is negative, it can turn a healthy workplace into a toxic environment. It can ruin professional and personal relationships, get people fired or drive good employees away.

How to identify toxic gossip

When a conversation in the lunch room is negative, inflammatory, embarrassing or hurtful to others – it's toxic. If it exults in somebody's misfortune or denigrates their abilities or character – it's toxic. If it's something you would not say to the person's face – it's toxic. If it takes certain facts and twists them into something mean-spirited – it's definitely toxic – and even dangerous. For example, a married male and his married female co-worker are spending a lot of time together. The truth is that they must – because they have an important project to complete on a short deadline. Somebody starts a rumour that they're having an affair at work. The fallout from such a rumour spreading could destroy their professional reputations – and potentially their marriages.

Such gossip has a malicious intent and can have a profound effect not only on the person or people being gossiped about, but on the entire team. It can damage morale, productivity, trust, and everyone's emotional health by causing conflict and creating or exacerbating personality clashes. People may form cliques, take sides and refuse to work with certain co-workers. Careers are liable to be damaged and good employees may finally get fed up and leave.

Gossip as a form of bullying

Gossip can be an insidious form of bullying or harassment. If the intent is to demean, propagate lies or half truths about people, or designed to hurt, denigrate and destroy reputations behind people's backs, then gossip has crossed a line into workplace harassment. Because gossip often concerns inference and rumour rather than established fact, it can be difficult to find out who started it, let alone undo or refute it.

Why people gossip

Being cautious with gossip is common sense, but the lure of being in the loop is seductive – and largely human nature. So why do some people feel the need to constantly gossip? There are likely as many reasons as there are rumours, but a few are:

- **To feel part of the group.** People gossip to feel as though they belong to the group. Yet, when acceptance is based on being "in on a secret," it is not based on a person's identity, but on exclusion or maliciousness.
- **To feel important.** Many gossipers love to be seen as the source of information and they feel powerful when they attract requests for more information.
- **To feel superior.** People who don't feel good about themselves temporarily feel better when they judge others negatively.

- **Out of envy.** People gossip in order to hurt those whose talents or lifestyle they envy.
- **Out of boredom.** When people can't generate interesting discussions based on knowledge or ideas, gossip often will fill the void.
- **Out of anger.** Someone who doesn't have the courage to settle a dispute face-to-face, or is not in a position to resolve a situation with someone in a superior position, often gets revenge by making disparaging remarks about the person.

Gossiping demonstrates a person's insecurity and mean-spiritedness. It also leaves everyone involved feeling uncomfortable. Remember that people often enjoy being the center of attention while divulging a piece of gossip, so by not giving them the attention they are seeking, you are already promoting a gossip-free culture.

Breaking the gossip cycle

You don't want to gossip but, at the same time, you don't want to be gossiped about, so you simply listen and nod. But by listening, you're still supporting and promoting gossip. The more people listen, the more likely others are to tell you the latest "dirt". If you don't listen, the gossip has nowhere to go.

Here's how to get out of the gossip pipeline:

- **Be busy.** Gossips want attention. If you're preoccupied with your work, you can't be available to listen to their latest story.
- **Don't participate.** Don't give visual clues that you're 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.
- **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.
- **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.
- **Keep your private life private.** Don't trust personal information with co-workers. Remember, if someone is gossiping about others, he or she will gossip about you too.
- **Choose your friends wisely at work.** Share information sparingly until you're sure that you have built up a level of trust. Also, close association with gossipers will give the perception that you are also a gossiper.

If you feel certain gossip has crossed a moral line and is becoming harassment, speak to your manager or go to your Human Resources department. A company interested in a healthy work environment will not tolerate workplace gossip or harassment and will take action.

Looking for additional support? Your Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) can help. You can receive support through a variety of resources. Call your EFAP at **1 800 387-4765** or visit workhealthlife.com.

Responses to unwelcome gossip

It's important not to feed the gossip with curiosity, agreement and further questions. It's best to simply change the subject. Here are some other possible responses:

- I notice that you talk about Jane a lot. I'm curious why she interests you so much?
- Let's take a look at it from Jane's side.
- I am more interested in what *you're* up to.
- Let's talk about something more positive or decide what we're going to do this afternoon.
- I feel uncomfortable listening to negative judgments about people unless we figure out how to help them.

If you are the victim of toxic gossip

First, remember that it can be easy to misunderstand what you hear, so make sure that the person is talking negatively about you and not someone with the same first name or a project you may be involved with.

If you're certain you are the target of negative comments, resist the urge to snap back or sulk. Ignoring what you heard isn't the solution either because it will be difficult to continue treating the instigator as a professional. If you do nothing, every time you work with that person you will remember their disparaging comments, and feel more resentful.

It's best to deal with the perpetrator directly. Inform him or her that you are aware of what is being said behind your back. Do not get defensive, angry or aggressive. Just focus on getting the facts straight and removing any implied innuendo. While you are not obliged to provide any details or facts, letting them know the truth can often help. Tell them that you regard gossiping as dishonest and disrespectful.

A last thought

Some offices can feel more like an episode of *Gossip Girl* than a place of business. While it's easy to get drawn into workplace drama, keep in mind that if you indulge in gossip, you may develop an office gossip reputation of your own. Instead, focus on accomplishing your own professional goals. When it comes to your job, wearing blinders to keep you from being distracted by gossip and unprofessional behaviour can only help your chances of success.

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