



DIVERSITY FRIDAY

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WORKPLACE GOSSIP

GOSSIP is idle talk or rumour, especially about the personal or private affairs of others; the act is also known as dishing or tattling. Gossiping in the workplace is like a vortex that can suck many people in and pull down professionalism!

"So live that you wouldn't be ashamed to sell the family parrot to the town gossip"
~ Will Rogers

We've all experienced it. You step into the elevator and overhear two other riders talking about someone else in a conspiratorial manner. You may or may not know the person they are discussing. The "idle gossip" may arouse your curiosity, and you might find yourself straining to "hear more" of the conversation. Or what they are saying may be so hurtful that it makes you wince. Gossip in the workplace is about as common as office collections. Most of us have engaged in it at one time or another. But workplace gossip causes a great deal of harm and impacts both the individuals involved, and the organization as a whole. Here are just a few examples of the cost of workplace gossip: (1) Lost productivity and wasted time, (2) Morale and trust are eroded, (3) Increased anxiety among employees as rumours circulate without any clear information as to what is fact and what isn't, (4) Divisiveness tends to grow among employees as people may "take sides", (5) Feelings and reputations are hurt, sometimes causing severe damage, (6) The "gossipers" may jeopardize chances for their own advancement because they are perceived as unprofessional, (7) Good employees may leave the company due to the unhealthy work atmosphere.

People who engage in workplace gossip may do so for several reasons. They may have a strong need to "fit in", and feel that gossip will help them achieve this. Unfortunately, gossiping often has the opposite effect. Gossipers often suffer from low self-esteem, and think that talking about others or spreading rumours makes them feel important, or powerful. Like any unhealthy behaviour, gossiping does not increase self esteem or make the gossipier feel more in control. It's very easy to get drawn in to the gossip circle, and often difficult to resist. Here are some tips to avoid getting involved in non-productive and sometimes destructive gossip.

First it takes a decision to not participate in the workplace rumour and gossip mill. Then it requires discipline to stick to your guns and take a stand. If co-workers attempt to draw you in to their gossip, let them know directly that you aren't interested in participating in this type of conversation. You don't have to be critical or judgmental, but just clear about your own feelings of discomfort talking about something or someone when you don't have all the facts, and excuse yourself from the conversation. This will serve several purposes. It will send a message to the gossipers that what they are doing is not acceptable. Others who feel the same way you do will be more likely to follow suit and not become involved with the gossip, thus taking away the audience. And lastly, you will feel good that you have said "no" to a something that wastes time and could cause harm.

It's always a good idea to step back and ask yourself several questions when you are tempted to participate in rumours or gossip:

Is what I am about to say true? Is it harmless? Is it necessary? How would I feel if someone said something similar about me? How would I feel if I saw my words quoted in the daily paper tomorrow? How am I going to feel later if I say this? (or listen to this) Does gossiping honour my own personal values?

Much is to be gained by turning down the opportunity to gossip while at work. And it's not as hard as you might think. With conscious effort and conviction, you can do your part to derail the harmful effects of destructive gossip and keep the work environment healthy and happy for all. Some rumours take on a more personal tone; these are generally what we think of as gossip. Gossip tends to be related to interpersonal relationships, is often malicious in nature and can get out of control quickly. It should thus be addressed promptly – before it leads to harassment or bullying!

PREVENTING RUMOURS

Well Informed Workers: When people know what's going on they don't need to guess as much.

Communication: Clear communication is fundamental, especially when facing adversity, it will prevent distrust and stress.

Honesty & Openness: Cut off rumours from the start by explaining when all information can't be revealed about certain matters; people know when they aren't being told the whole story.

Transparency: The more people understand about the systems in place, the more they will trust.

Interactive Management: The closer Managers are to their teams and other workers, the easier it is to communicate and build trust. This also gives opportunity to hear rumours when they start, instead of after they're already out of control.

Rules & Regulations: Establish a policy to deal with rumours and gossiping; make it clear that such behaviour is unacceptable.

Info Sharing & Training: Talk about the bad effects of rumours in the workplace and about punitive measures for dealing with such behaviour. The more that people understand why the behaviour is damaging, the more likely they are to monitor their own participation.

Culture of Cooperation: Build a culture that promotes cooperation rather than competition. Putting people in direct competition with each other for reward or recognition creates opportunity for conflict and resentment and lays a foundation of distrust which allows rumours to grow.

MANAGING RUMOURS

Deal with rumours immediately: Rumours can spread quickly and they often change and grow. Talk to people, find out about the rumour. When appropriate have meetings to address the issues and communicate the truth.

Set a good example: When someone comes to share an 'interesting story', don't get involved; ask questions to find out the truth and talk to a Superior about the rumour. Keep the communication lines open to prevent rumours from the onset.

Watch for 'rumour patterns': If certain types of rumours continue to spread it may mean that more info needs to be provided. Rumours affect productivity, so it must be dealt with directly as a performance issue.

Audit your rumour behaviour regularly: Think about what you might have done to spread rumours and why you participated. Is everyone holds themselves a little bit more accountable for rumours their frequency – and their negative consequences – will decrease.

"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

Proverbs 20:19

"Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets; therefore do not associate with a simple babbler."

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