

## Tip Sheet: Dealing with Gossip

Friendly work banter and gossip are worlds apart. But how do you tell the difference? Here are some definitions and descriptions that can help you make the distinction:

- **Discussion:** A friendly work discussion that talks about others keeps the references to other people general, friendly and supportive. The speaker is not obsessed with picking holes in another person's character but is merely imparting information about what another person or people have done in a matter-of-fact way, to further an objective, work-related conversation and to enlighten the listener about work relevant information;
- **Gossip:** Gossip tends to be talk that gains attention for the speaker. The speaker will often adopt a confidential tone and is using the information about somebody else to be the center of attention and will impart the details in a way that tries to undermine the credibility or likability of another person. The details may be given with moralizing undertones and character assassination may be the top of the gossip's agenda. Often you are told more personal details than you care to know about. The motivations behind gossip include attention-seeking, self-inflation, exaggeration and a me-versus-them mentality;
- **Grapevine Gossip:** This is gossip pertaining to general change occurring within a workplace. Someone started it and now it is running about like wildfire. Usually this happens in an uncertain environment and is fueled by fear, poor communications from management levels and wild guesses by staff. It is less personal than gossip attacking another person but is as equally damaging and demoralizing.

When you are faced with gossip in the workplace, consider the following:

**Don't take work gossip to heart.** A lot of work gossip is just that - gossip. It is filled with innuendo, rumors, errors and even deliberately malicious nonsense. Take it with a pinch of salt rather than reacting personally or defensively. There is no doubt that gossip must be dealt with strongly and immediately but it will not help your situation as a team leader or colleague to take it personally. Focus instead on the reality that there is an underlying reason or series of reasons causing the gossip and focus on dealing with it objectively as a task rather than as a personal attack to be foiled in an emotional or angry manner.

**Arm yourself with the facts.** Is there truth to the tall tales? Sometimes there is a kernel of truth and this should be uncovered before addressing the problem so that you are well placed to respond with facts rather than emotions. This is especially important in relation to change management gossip where wild ideas take root quickly and spread even faster; look for factual answers by asking questions of the right people, namely, those who are in a position to give definitive and accurate answers. You may also need to seek additional facts from trustworthy

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sources such as internal bulletins, official publications and meeting minutes if there is gossip about changes or redundancies that might sideswipe your response.

**Assess the context.** Which type of gossip are you dealing with - personal gossip or workplace change gossip? Both require fast and firm treatment to prevent staff morale from plummeting. The following two steps address each type.

**Address workplace change gossip with speed, support and honesty.** During times of rapid change and uncertainty in a workplace, gossip will naturally increase due to fear and anticipated negative outcomes. It is important to realize this and to sort the fear factor from the facts. If you are a team leader, be a source of reassurance to your team by acknowledging their fears and worries. Armed with prior researched facts, tell them what you do know; equally tell them what you don't know and do not make things up. When you don't know something, tell them that you'll find out. Be the rock that supports them and diverts gossip back on itself.

**Challenge a personal gossiper directly.** Some people gossip because they enjoy it or they feel insecure about others in the workplace. Most gossipers are pure attention-seekers. A persistent and long-term gossiper must be stopped in their tracks by calling their bluff. View such people as attention-seekers and give them some attention within limits by hearing them out in a closed-door meeting:

**Don't participate in work gossip.** If you participate in work gossip, you perpetuate it and you belittle yourself. In particular, if you have leadership aspirations, or you are already in a position of leadership, any participation in work gossip by you will be viewed negatively and as anti-team spirited. Always ask yourself about your motivation when discussing others in a personal way within the work context; if you are talking about them to ingratiate yourself with others or to make yourself appear better, than it is likely that you are gossiping.

<http://www.wikihow.com/Deal-with-Office-Gossip>