

Gossip's Toll on the Organisation

Want to know a secret? Gossip is undermining your business strategy.

Gossip is the informal and sometimes hidden communication medium within an organisation. It can be used as a means of building subversive relationships, gaining an advantage and destabilising the management hierarchy.

Of course, almost everyone engages in harmless gossip at some point, and that's precisely what makes it so dangerous. When harmless gossip networks are used to carry damaging information, staff can become drawn in to attempts to discredit individuals or resist changes in business strategy and culture. How you manage gossip is what makes the difference.

For example, a manager who is personally discredited will find it very difficult to gain the respect and authority needed to implement changes. The change itself is not unpopular; the gossip makes staff prejudge the change and the initiative fails before it even has a chance to get off the ground.

How to minimise gossip in the workplace

There are measures that you can take to minimise the spread of gossip in your organisation. If you are able and prepared to communicate openly with staff, gossip will reduce. The following strategies will help you prevent the spread of gossip before it has a chance to gain a foot hold:

- **Set the tone at the top.** Bar the spread of rumours by setting a clear corporate policy on office gossip. The culture in your organisation must ensure that rumour is seen as unacceptable.
- **Put the policy in writing and regularly communicate** it to employees. For example, your handbook may state: "Employees will not knowingly or unintentionally make false statements about the company or any company employee during the period of time the employee is employed by the organisation."



- **Talk to your employees.** Discuss how gossip can undermine morale, harm careers and may even result in lawsuits. Point out the consequences of gossip, and how these may relate to them (e.g. halt in communication and decline of productivity).
- **Appeal to employees' self-interest and sense of fairness.** Discourage gossip, but don't sound like you are trying to prevent normal conversation.
- **Keep one step ahead.** There are times when you can predict gossip, for example during a period of change. It is the supervisor's responsibility to keep on top of gossip regularly, listening out for potential rumours and also pre-empting potential topics of conversation.
- **Tell it like it is.** Gossip often arises from a belief that managers are not telling the whole story, so rather than avoid uncomfortable topics of conversation, managers must be prepared to speak openly about potential issues rather than trying to portray change only in a positive light.

Gossip isn't a problem that can be effectively handled by HR policy alone – it must be handled firmly by the line manager too. If gossip has gone beyond prevention and you cannot stop it, try to minimise the damage by choosing to respond to the criticism in positive and proactive ways:

- **Confront gossip.** If gossip does spill out into the open, the manager must confront it directly and not simply brush it off or ignore it. If possible, privately talk with the source of the gossip - this will allow you to get to the root of the

problem without causing more damage. Sometimes you need to confront a group, and in this case remain to the point in your discussion.

- **Get the details.** Look objectively at the facts of the situation: what has been said, what is the evidence, and why is it being repeated?
- **Be open.** By dealing openly with gossip, a manager gains more respect and is more likely to have their communication heard above the background gossip.
- **Remain calm.** It is important to remain calm and detached during confrontations as well as during your normal work day, even if there is gossip around you. Do not accuse the other person or allow yourself to get excited by their remarks.
- **Communicate.** Sometimes misinformation due to lack of communication may be the cause of all the trouble. In this case, increase your availability to members, and foster better communication through different channels such as a regular newsletter, email forum and web site.

The irony behind workplace gossip

While workplace gossip is unproductive and can breed resentment, it can sometimes serve a positive purpose, especially if it involves issues that really matter to the company or team. For example, if a manager is acting in a manipulative or unethical way, gossip will spread that allows employees to be on their guard. Another way gossip is used is to 'leak' information into the gossip network to pre-empt organisational changes about lay-offs or promotions. People are usually much more comfortable with change that they already know about. It is fairly typical for politicians to leak controversial reports to the press prior to the official release date for exactly this reason.

Building an environment conducive to effective communication

Gossip can be much more than the passing of harmless rumours – it can undermine the official lines of communication in an organisation to the extent that staff can place more credibility in gossip than in what they hear from managers and leaders.

While it can be difficult to keep a balance between 'harmless' gossip and rumours that can damage an organisation, the key to keeping control is for managers to be prepared to communicate openly with their staff, discuss concerns and in turn encourage staff to voice their thoughts in a productive and positive manner.

While gossip may always be present at some level, managers should ensure they maintain the control and credibility that are vital in leading a stable, high performing organisation. ●

Question:

When hiring new staff, how important is it to know about their behavioural style?

Answer:

When roles and responsibilities are clearly defined, it is very important to look for staff who are predisposed to working in a certain way. They will settle into the job quicker, enjoy it more and perform better. When roles are not clearly defined, managers have a tendency to build the team and roles around the individuals, which can lead to uncertainty and lack of structure.

It's tempting for managers to look for 'quick fixes' when hiring staff, such as candidates with good qualifications or experience at a competitor. However, high performance can be highly dependent on the working environment, so a high performer in your competitor's business culture may only be average in yours.

It's better to not fill a role than fill it with someone who doesn't fit, because this creates management overhead, team friction and ultimately the person will not stay long term. Instead, look for personality and behavioural styles first and help the new employee learn and adapt to your culture. Understanding the employee's behavioural style and helping them understanding themselves will improve communication amongst all parties and develop effective relationships within work teams.

The DISC behavioural profiling tool is a simple and effective means of assessing new staff to ensure that they will thrive in your cultural environment. 75% of the Fortune 500 companies utilise DISC to help their staff understand communication and behavioural styles, adapt to others' styles and facilitate communication for optimum performance.

