Workplace gossip and its effects

We're all prone to discussing the boss' latest decision, complaining about a difficult co-worker or speculating 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.