

Office Gossip: Where to Draw the Line

Dear Dr. Mazie,

I am so sick of all the gossip that takes place in our office. It never seems to end. Once in awhile it can be funny, but most of it is vicious and hurtful. The worst part is that many of my coworkers believe what they hear without checking it out or talking to the person the gossip is about. It's just wrong and it makes me hate coming in to work.

Wyman in New Jersey

Wherever people gather, there can be gossip. It's a universal human behavior, a way for people to connect. I think most of us are like you in that we see its destructive nature. It angers us and can wear us out. I've even seen people's careers ruined by gossip and individual lives destroyed.

What many people don't realize is that there are actually some positives that are associated with gossip, as long as it's not meant to be hurtful or malicious. In the workplace, informal chitchat can serve a functional purpose for employees because it gives them an opportunity to form alliances, socialize and connect. So many of us are now working nonstop on a computer all day, we sometimes forget that our coworkers may need to vent or get some perspective on a situation they are facing. The trick is to know when to draw the line between open communication and hurtful gossip.

An organization's leaders set the tone for both positive and negative behavior, so it's critical that those in managerial positions model what they expect to see from their employees. Some organizations have strived for a zero tolerance policy regarding gossip, but research has shown that these programs often work in reverse and can actually lead to weakened morale. Strange but true!

Here are some basic guidelines for organizations who want to know the quickest way to set some boundaries in the workplace:

- 1) Deal with rumors immediately and directly. If someone tells you something that is malicious, ask them where they heard it.
- 2) Do not automatically move a rumor or gossip forward, especially if you are in a managerial position.
- 3) Make it clear to all employees that if they hear malicious gossip, they should immediately report it so that it can be stopped before anyone is hurt by it.
- 4) Clearly define for all employees, including upper management, that malicious gossip will not be tolerated, it will be tracked down, and all involved will be written up.
- 5) If gossip crosses the line into harassment, the company can face serious liability issues.

Know that malicious or excessive gossip disrupts production, lowers morale, and can unfairly target an individual employee. Too many people will share idle rumors with others in leadership before they determine whether or not it is true. They get others involved unnecessarily

and even contaminate the relationships between employees. When this happens, a healthy work environment can be quickly destroyed.

If you manage the employee who has told you the rumor, then counsel them as to the damage such rumors can have on fellow employees, find out where they heard it and make it a priority to resolve it. By failing to trace the rumor's origin and resolve it, we perpetuate the problem and further enable those who enjoy spreading negative information.

It takes courage to stop a rumor from spreading, but you can tell a coworker you'd rather not be told such things. If it continues, let their supervisor know about the rumor and who told you (again, this takes courage). It is the supervisor's responsibility to track down the original source of the rumor and stop it. With quick action, each of us has the power to help protect the individual who may be the source of the rumor and preserve their reputation.

A nationally recognized speaker, workshop leader and trainer, Dr. Mazie Leftwich, Psy.D has a clinical background in applied psychology with expertise in organizational and personal development. She is Senior Vice President of Contract Land Staff, LLC, where she oversees training and team excellence programs.

