

Gossip in the Workplace

Twenty years in corporate America has given me enough experience to accept the fact that gossip can be stronger than the truth. Throw on top of that the hundreds of clients that I have treated that also have worked for, or currently work for rumor mills, and one might guess my disposition on gossip in the workplace. You may not expect victims of gossip to be treated by a psychologist, but the sad truth is there is no shortage of these victims. I use the word “victim” because I cannot think of a more accurate description for a person who has been the target of half truths or lies. But when I really think about gossip in the workplace, I ask myself, is the victim also the company? If it is the company, then this would mean that everyone suffers when there is gossip.

Sexuality is always the popular winner when it comes to gossip. It may appear interesting when the water cooler heats up on Monday morning, but think about the person who is getting a deluge thrown on them. Attractive people tend to be the major targets, especially women. Is it really beneficial to anyone when someone is assumed to be sleeping his or her way to the top? Must one be unattractive in order to get ahead in a company? And what if someone is ambitious enough to work his or her way toward the top? Does that make him or her fair game for rumors? I once had an attractive, intelligent, female client who fell victim to corporate gossip at its worst; a jealous co-worker heard rumor of this client’s past life. The jealous co-worker was best friends with the company’s judgmental president, who demoted my client under false pretenses. My client quit a month later and moved on to a better job. Even though my client knew the rumors were false, and she had been an effective supervisor, she felt as if she had failed. These feelings went away only a few months later when most of her former staff called her to report they resigned due in part to the president’s injustice with her.

Gossip hurts not only the intended victim, but also everyone in the company. Hardworking employees whose only goal is to excel in their positions suffer from gossips, who take up company time. For example, many jobs depend on the productivity of others, and therefore time is wasted by a gossip is everyone’s wasted time. Gossip leads to turn over, which is expensive and time consuming. A creative, intelligent person with a good work ethic may be disenchanted with the rumor mill environment and seek out another company where there is more maturity and respect. Also, a company’s image suffers when rumors spread about a company’s lack of respect for people’s sexual orientation or race. One person can begin a rumor about a company, like reputations for hiring only a “certain type of person.” But one person’s perception is not enough evidence to condemn every worker in that company. A wise client once told me, “Whenever I hear someone making sweeping statements about a company as a whole, I automatically tune out. Companies’ reputations are not always based on the truth.”

Supervisors may regret the day they declared an “open door policy” when subordinates give them an earful of useless banter that wastes time. They must feel like hypocrites if they don’t listen, and feel as if they’re wasting company time if they do listen. Imagine a co-worker complaining every time someone gets promoted before him or her. Has this person ever thought that maybe he or she is not getting promoted due to behavior unbecoming of a professional? Imagine a co-worker speculating how much money another is earning? Who really cares about someone’s taste in clothes or a new car they parked in the company parking lot? How does this type of gossip benefit the

individual workers or the company? Supervisors need to confront their co-workers and subordinates and tell them that some topics are simply unprofessional. Unfortunately, when one supervisor refuses to listen to rumors, the gossip may move to any supervisor who will listen. Some people seem to relish in their ability to announce negative headlines; they appear to feel a source of pride and accomplishment when they are the first ones to release a new rumor. This behavior is indicative of poor self-esteem, immaturity, and a lack of self-control.

I once had a supervisor at a college I worked for that radiated gossip. He carefully chose the receivers of his “important information” (mostly women), and began the trail of useless half-truths. This person attempted to bolster his poor self esteem by “impressing” students and co-workers with firsthand knowledge. What made this supervisor dangerous was not just his love of gossip, but the fact that he was in a position of immediate respect. People may believe statements coming from people in authority. In addition, this supervisor could not confront a subordinate on the gossip he heard (or made up) about him or her. His lack of confrontation and love of gossip lead to numerous mistakes, distrust, anger, and the loss of quality staff. Eventually he was “let go,” but unfortunately there are more bad supervisors out there to take his place. When I was fortunate enough to supervise a large staff, one of my main priorities was to outlaw gossip. This seemingly impossible goal was really quite simple to aspire to through communication and confrontation. My staff verbally agreed with my “no gossip rule”, and when a subordinate came close to violating the rule, I simply confronted him or her.

Gossip can be devastating and the damage can be permanent, such as unsubstantiated accusations of racism or pedophilia. These accusations have no defense and are immediately believed by people who want to believe. Even open minded, well-intentioned people may shy away from a co-worker labeled a racist or sex offender. I once had a client who was accused of pedophilia by an alcoholic, angry co-worker. The accuser, while having no proof, placed suspicion in the minds of co-workers and management. Eventually my client lost his job under the pretence that the company did not want negative publicity. Twenty years of dedicated service to the corporation went down the drain because of an unsubstantiated accusation. Years later my client is still trying to recover emotionally and financially. The corporation decided to get rid of the immediate problem (my client) instead of treating the bigger more devastating problem; gossip.

The next time you hear a workplace rumor, ask yourself, “How does listening to this gossip benefit me and the company? Am I encouraging my co-worker to continue his or her gossip? If this co-worker is talking about another co-worker this way, what is he or she saying about me?” As a final note, all of the above stories were printed with not only my permission, but also encouragement from my former clients.