

## Gossip at the Office

### Entertainment or Destructive Behaviour?

By Andrée Iffrig

At a meeting I attended recently, the subject of gossip came up. Was it a harmless way to pass the time or a scourge at the office? Those who gossiped regularly defended it as a way to build relationships and gain acceptance at work. "What's wrong with a little chit chat?" Those of us who have been victims of gossip and ridicule were less enthusiastic.

This is the sound of gossip relayed orally in an organization: It's two colleagues huddled together at a desk, and one says to the other with great sincerity, "Thought you'd want to know this", as a prelude to sharing a story that makes another employee sound bad. A consultant sits down to coffee with a client and proceeds to defame a fellow consultant, claiming the best of intentions.

These "insider scoops" are designed to make the narrator look superior to the victim in the story. Sharing them comes from that most human of predilections, burying a bad motive beneath an apparently good one. I've been guilty myself and know the pangs of conscience that go with realizing I've sabotaged a colleague's reputation. Rarely does she get a chance to defend herself.

Gossip has been with us a long time. Injunctions against it are almost as old as the hills. What has changed from ancient to modern times is new technology for silently spreading gossip to the four corners of the globe with the click of a mouse. What used to be mischief between a narrator and one or two listeners has become slander on a grand scale. Using digital communication you can cut a person's reputation to shreds with a few well-aimed emails.

Gossip often originates with one person who feels sore or threatened by someone else and who then buries these negative feelings beneath a veneer of superiority, claiming knowledge and understanding of the other

person's motives. Tale bearing is also a third party hearing office gossip who, wanting to fit

in, confidently passes it on to a friend in a phone call. With each telling, a new spin is put on the story. If there was any substance to the original narrative, it has long since been lost.

At issue here is not whether the talebearer is telling the truth. Some of what passes for gossip may be true. The difficulty is that gossip never gives us the whole picture. And you almost never have an opportunity to tell your side of the story.

Regardless of the gossip's intentions, the consequences remain the same. If I take someone into my confidence with a piece of gossip, there is no guarantee my confidant won't repeat it. What was a story between two people can quickly become legion with long-lasting repercussions. I have no control over what my listeners do with my stories, even the ones I regret.

How do you put a halt to gossip that has run amuck at the office? In her article, "*Office Gossip: How to Put a Lid on It!*" in SAIT's *Training Matters*, author Fran Kimmel suggests challenging gossip directly. Research has shown that when gossip is confronted in a group situation, it quickly peters out. You can initiate new topics and change the tone of the conversation by sharing ideas or solutions to real problems in the workplace. You can also organize your workday so that you avoid gossip. Managers would be wise to avoid gossiping themselves and model open and accurate communications.

Andrée Iffrig is the author of *Find Your Voice at Work – The Power of Storytelling in the Workplace*. Visit [www.find-your-voice.ca](http://www.find-your-voice.ca) to learn more.