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Gossip's Tangled Vines (CDE #16071)

By Candice Solie, Minnesota Chapter

An old schoolyard chant goes, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me." The author of this chant must have had incredible self-esteem or lived in a dream world, because, for most of us, words can hurt. Harmful words can inflict considerable damage on individuals and relationships. This damage, unlike broken bones, doesn't always heal completely.

One form of harmful words is malicious gossip – rumor and innuendo based on incomplete facts or downright fiction – intended to cause turmoil or discredit individuals or institutions. Another, less insidious, form of harmful words is speculative gossip, rumor based on assumptions about what the future holds or what is going on currently. In the workplace, both forms of gossip can have serious repercussion on the morale and productivity of the center. Left unchecked, both forms may breed negativity, stress, friction among co-workers and ultimately increased turnover.

Speculative Gossip

All organizations have an informal communications network: the company grapevine. Communications centers are no different. The center grapevine is alive and kicking in centers around the country. The grapevine can be a positive source of center information, based on factual knowledge, or a negative source, based on speculative gossip. The key to whether it is positive or negative is the communications structure within the center.

Speculative gossip about the center occurs out of a desire to fill a void in the employees' perceived "need to know." This void is created when management fails to communicate effectively with employees about issues that affect the center and its staff. A center grapevine actively circulating speculative gossip about the center should be a red flag, indicating a serious communications breakdown between management and employees.

To repair this breakdown and negate speculative gossip based on rumor and false information, managers should take a proactive stance and flood the grapevine with correct information. Make sure employees know management has an open-door policy and is willing to share, to the best of its knowledge and ability, information about events and news in and around the center.

This information-sharing should be both formal and informal. Formal information-sharing involves communicating via policy or informative memos, staff meetings and center newsletters. Informal information-sharing involves communicating via face-to-face chats, actively listening and responding to employees' needs and concerns, remaining aware of grapevine chatter and responding immediately if false information is circulating.

Malicious Gossip

Malicious gossip also feeds the center grapevine. However, unlike speculative gossip, it is spread with the sole intent of causing turmoil or discrediting certain individuals. Malicious gossip, whether directed at the center or an individual, cannot be eliminated or reduced by simply improving the communications structure within the center, because the motivation behind the gossip is not to fill a need to know. Its motives are to create disharmony and inflict pain. Unfortunately, some people feed on malicious gossip and enjoy spreading it. The motivation could be jealousy, personal dislike, revenge for a perceived grievance or a perverse sense of power gratification. Whatever its motivation, you should never tolerate malicious gossip.

Note that the issue here is malicious gossip. Normal conversations often contain some gossip. For instance, during the course of a conversation, Mary may say to John, "I heard Jane went to Florida on her vacation." Gossip? Yes. malicious? No. It is quite unlikely this information would cause hard feelings or disturb Jane if she becomes aware of it.

However, what if Mary said, "I heard Jane went to Florida on her vacation and did you know Officer Smith took his vacation at the same time? I bet the two of them went to Florida together. I've seen the way they look at each other." The seed of malicious gossip has been sown. As it grows and spreads, it changes from speculation to "fact." Jane and Officer Smith's reputations are tarnished and hard feelings and friction emerge among co-workers.

Do not tolerate malicious gossip in the center. The consequences are too high. The inherent stress associated with job tasks and shift-work requirements is heavy enough. Relationship stress caused by malicious gossip increases this burden to the point where the stress may become too much to handle.

You can do two primary things to root out the perpetrators of malicious gossip and nip this behavior in the bud. First and foremost, management should establish written performance standards specifically prohibiting harmful gossip, back-biting and rabble-rousing. Communicate these performance standards clearly to all employees and enforce them strictly. Make malicious gossipers aware that this behavior has serious consequences, that it is harmful to co-workers and the center and that perpetrators face disciplinary action, including termination, when circumstances warrant.

Second, co-workers should try to discourage malicious gossip by rebuffing the gossipers' attempts to ensnare them in its tangled vines. Malicious gossipers need the help of others to maximize the impact of their gossip; if co-workers refuse to participate, gossip goes nowhere. If co-workers report these gossipers to management and management acts appropriately, gossipers should realize they are hurting only themselves, not their intended victims.

If left unchecked, the weeds of gossip ensnare the morale and productivity of the center. It increases negativity and stress, causes friction among co-workers and leads to increased turnover. Management and employees have the responsibility to ensure speculative and malicious gossip are nipped in the bud, so the professionals in the center can fulfill their critically important mission in an environment free of unprofessional and petty distractions.

About the Author

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