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COLLABORATION

Stop Complaining About Your Colleagues Behind Their Backs

by Deborah Grayson Riegel

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In my coaching work with leaders and teams, I often ask my clients whether they engage in workplace gossip. More often than not, they respond, "of course not!" with a look on their faces that indicates that they are insulted to have been asked such a question.

But when I ask them whether they have ever participated in a "confirmation expedition" — whereby they 1) ask a colleague to confirm their own negative or challenging experience with a third colleague who is not present, or 2) welcome a similar line of confirmation inquiry from another colleague about a third colleague who is not present, most admit that this is, in fact, a regular part of their daily work life.

While leaders and teams might consider this behavior to be innocent "blowing off steam" or the more strategic "confirming performance data," I consider it a form of workplace gossip.

But it's not just me. Authors Nancy Kurland and Lisa Hope Pelled, in their research paper, Passing the Word: Toward a Model of Gossip and Power in the Workplace, define gossip as: "informal and evaluative talk in an organization, usually among no more than a few individuals, about another member of that organization who is not present." When you think about how often your workplace conversations are 1) informal *("I'm just hanging out in Linda's office"*); 2) evaluative (*"discussing how difficult it is to get a timely response from Doug in Accounting"*); 3) among no more than a few individuals *("...and Marci's here too."*); and 4) about another member of that organization who is not present (*"Doug's at his desk, of course!"*), you might start to realize how often you're engaging in gossip, and contributing to gossip's damaging effects.

Like what? Like the erosion of trust, hurt feelings, decreased morale, damaged reputations, reduced personal and professional credibility, increased anxiety, divisiveness, and attrition.

Despite the high costs of gossip, the drive to engage in it is strong. Dr. Peggy Drexler, research psychologist and professor of psychology at Cornell University's Weill Medical College writes that "anthropologists say that throughout human history, gossip has been a way to bond with others — even a tool to isolate those who aren't supporting the group."

Talking with one or more coworkers about how hard it is to get Doug in Accounting to give a timely response creates a feeling of connection with everyone else who is struggling with Doug's lack of responsiveness. Those similarly frustrated by Doug treat one another with in-group favoritism, a common and central aspect of human behavior, whereby people act more pro-socially towards members of their own group relative to those outside their group.

Gossip is also a means of venting for those who are reluctant to give direct feedback to or have difficult conversations with their colleagues. As I cited in my *HBR* article, When to Skip a Difficult Conversation, "In a 2013 Globis survey of more than 200 professionals on the topic of difficult conversations...80% of respondents reported that these conversations were a part of their job, [but] more than half indicated that they didn't feel like they had adequate training on how to conduct them effectively."

By talking to anyone, everyone, or even one person about another colleague who isn't there to hear the feedback, provide his or her perspective, and engage in joint problem solving, you are undermining the benefits of an open, honest relationship and a feedback-rich culture.

Finally, we use gossip as a way to collect evidence that confirms our beliefs, satisfying our confirmation bias — the tendency to look for information that confirms what we already believe to be true. By checking in with a coworker about whether she, too, experiences Doug as slow to respond, we get confirmation for our existing beliefs, and the satisfaction that comes from "being right" about Doug. And as Judith Glaser explains in her article, Your Brain Is Hooked on Being Right, the flood of adrenaline and dopamine that accompanies feeling right can become downright addictive.

Considering how satisfying it is to be right, how tempted we are to avoid giving direct feedback and having difficult conversations, and how often we seek confirmation for what we already believe, it can be hard to break the habit of engaging in gossip — as the instigator or the recipient.

Nevertheless, there are several strategies to help you and your team stop engaging in something so wrong that feels so right:

1) Name it, then pivot. First, call gossip "gossip" to stop it in its tracks. If you are engaging in "informal and evaluative talk in an organization, usually among no more than a few individuals, about another member of that organization who is not present," — especially if the aim is to confirm your experience rather than get constructive solutions — then you are participating in gossip. If you call someone on it, most people will step back at hearing a colleague say, "This sounds like gossip. Is that what you intended?" Second, pivot the conversation by asking, "How can I help you get a better outcome?" Only engage in coaching, brainstorming, and problem-solving conversations — not in problem-confirming ones.

2) Ask yourself or others why you need someone else's confirmation about a behavior that you're noticing in a third person. If it's to justify your feelings, to confirm that you're right, or to gain support for your point of view, don't bring someone else into the conversation. If it's to understand how you might be contributing to the dynamic or problem, to brainstorm helpful solutions, or to go on record to make a formal complaint for further investigation, then go for it.

3) Let people know that you have a policy of "if you have a problem with me, please tell me first." Adopt the "tell them first" policy with your colleagues, and, when someone approaches you with gossip about someone else, ask "Have you already told her?" to remind them of this policy.

4) Create a feedback-rich environment around you. The more you normalize feedback — both positive and negative, and both giving and receiving — the less likely people will be to look for alternative means to express their frustrations and concerns. Rather than "saving" feedback for annual performance reviews, make discussions about what someone did well, and what he or she could do differently, a part of every supervision meeting or project debrief. And make sure to give people positive feedback when they offer particularly useful feedback — even if it's hard to hear.

Gossip, even by any other name, is still a destructive communication strategy that negatively impacts individuals, teams and the whole organization. By stopping it in its tracks, choosing healthier and more helpful methods of communicating what's not working, and engaging in collaborative problem-solving, relationships and organizations can flourish.

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Ashwinikumar Patil   a day ago

Very nicely presented. After reading this I realised I have been doing gossiping , though unknowingly. And the inputs in the article will help me overcome this habit ...

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