

Gossip and Bullying in the Workplace

Gossip by nature is part of the **HUMAN** make-up. Elena Martinescu, a gossip researcher, states that according to evolutionary theorists, gossip developed in order to facilitate co-operation within a group. Gossip, whether in the workplace or not, can be both good and bad depending on the nature of it.

GOSSIP

Gossip is indirect and passive behavior that does not confront the person. It can look like:

- Malicious or actionable talk about someone beyond that person's hearing;
- Involvement false tales;
- Truthful remarks about something personal to another person;
- Any talk, whether personal or an organization's affairs, that is harmful or malicious;
- A form of "tattling" when there is no solution offered.

Gossip is just not that water-cooler conversation, they are increasingly showing up in work emails, as well as personal emails. We often treat email communications like oral conversations, they can often be informal and the writer can use poor judgement in writing them.

Gossip is a way to avoid responsibility of someone's feelings and a way to connect to others – although a lazy way. Bullies, on the other hand, use gossip, instead of facing their own issues.

RUMORS

Rumors should not be confused as being gossip. Seventy (70%) to ninety (90%) percent of all rumors are based on a kernel of truth. Gossip on the other hand is people talking about other people.

BULLYING

When people bully, they use gossip as a way to control or discredit an individual. When a person is discredited it becomes a "rush" for the bully. It is, in its basic form, an addiction of needing to feel powerful. Bullying is also thought of as a type of "workplace violence", as it is essentially a form of an attack (Peter Vajda).

Bullying behavior is repeated over time. This is different from harassment which is usually a single incident. Persistent harassment can become bullying over time. Bullies have different methods they employ. Types of bullying include:

Direct bullying. The bully & target are aware of what is going on and the behavior is visible. This behavior hurts, harms, or humiliates the victim and is overt and apparent to anyone witnessing it.

Indirect bullying. Bullies may be anonymous, behaviors are covert, subtle, and not immediately recognized for being bully. Victim may not realize they are being bullied right away and these bullies are socially sophisticated, calculating, and manipulative.

Verbal bullying. This can include mockery, humiliation, jokes, gossip, or other spoken abuse. This type of bullying is a lot like emotional bullying.

Intimidating bullying. Like physical bullying, it can be threats, exclusion, spying or other invasions of privacy.

Related to work performance bullying. Wrongful blame, work sabotage or interference, or stealing or take credit for an idea.

Retaliatory bullying. Victim can be labeled as lying, extreme social isolation, refused promotions, or other retaliatory actions.

Institutional bullying. This is when a workplace accepts and allows or even encourages bullying. This can include unrealistic workplace goals, forced overtime, or singling those that cannot keep up.

Physical bullying. This type is easy to recognize as it requires a direct action such as hitting, pushing, inappropriate touching, breaking objects, etc.

Emotional bullying. This type of bully requires some type of gossip that is heard or read. It can be name calling, writing notes/emails about a person, etc.

COSTS OF GOSSIPING/BULLYING

- **Lower attrition** due to good employees leaving the company because of an unhealthy work environment.
- For the gossiper & victim it is a **power struggle** with the gossiper over the victim.
- It can cause **stress and anxiety**
- **Ruins friendships/reputations** (for both the gossiper and victim)
- **Affects one's health**
 - Feeling sick or anxious prior to going to work or when thinking of work.
 - Having physical symptoms such as high blood pressure
 - Having a higher risk of Type 2 diabetes
 - Having trouble sleeping, waking up or getting quality sleep
 - Having headaches or a decreased appetite
- Gossip/bullying can have an effect on one's **mental health** as
 - Thinking and/or worrying about work even when off
 - Dreading going to work
 - Needing time off to de-stress
 - Losing interest in work or things that you used to enjoy
 - Increased risk for depression, anxiety or suicidal ideations
 - Low self-esteem
 - Self-doubt, worth, or wondering if you are imagining you are being bullied

STATISTICS OF GOSSIP & BULLYING

Disengaged employee. There is 37% higher absenteeism and 18% lower productivity (or 34% of the disengaged persons annual salary)

Gossip & conflict. 2.8 hours spent per week gossiping per employee. If there is a departmental conflict, or team, this can equate to a full-time position

Resignations. If employees are in a gossip heavy workplace, SHRM has reported most companies see 1/3 of their top-performers leave for less drama. This places, on the conservative side, hiring a new employee, hopefully with some of the same skills, between 150-200% of the employee's salary. It also takes about 6-9 months to find a qualified candidate. It also takes about 2 years for the new employee to reach the productivity level of an existing employee.

Absenteeism and sick-days. The avoidance of conflict from gossiping accounts to about 25% of all missing work.

Additionally, the impact of covert bullying can create stress for the individual as

- They do not know who is the bully
- Do not know who they can trust
- Feels isolated
- Wonders if "everyone is against them"

For the organization

- There is lack of accountability of the person or group that is doing the bullying
- The bullying is not taken seriously as it didn't directly happen to the person
- If the bullying is "cyberbullying" it can be taken outside the workplace and it does not stop at the end of the work day.

In 2017, the Workplace Bullying Institute stated that:

- About 70% of bullies are male and 30% are female.
- Both male and female bullies are more likely to target females.
- Sixty-one (61%) percent of bullying comes from bosses/supervisors
- Thirty-three percent (33%) come from co-workers.

Consider this. If a small company has 100 employees. Only 21% of employees are engaged and the rest are not. Based on a \$40,000 annual salary and \$13,400 per disengaged employee (34%) the complacency for that company costs \$1,074,400 per year.

ARE YOU GOSSIPING OR BULLYING

Use critical thinking skills and ask yourself the following questions:

- Is that I am about to say true?
- Is it harmless or necessary?
- How would you feel if someone said them to you or you saw them printed somewhere?
- How will you feel afterwards?
- Is this honoring your own personal values?

GOSSIP OR BULLYING SIGNS

The tone of the conversation. Gossip is usually spoken in “hushed” tones. They can often last for long periods of time.

Claims spring up without clear sources. Usually trying to find out where the gossip/rumor started will be unfruitful.

The topic of conversation is unaware. Usually the person who is being talked about is not aware or present when others are participating in the gossip.

Some pleasure is taken at someone’s misfortune. It would be uncomfortable retelling the conversation to the person that is being talked about.

Rumors that cannot be substantiated. Hearing something during the conversation that has no basis or fact to back it up.

STOPPING WORKPLACE GOSSIP/BULLYING

Encourage positive gossip. Employees can spread positive messages through employee appreciation messaging.

Provide avenues for workers to air their feelings. The most effective way is to have an open-door policy where employees feel safe in letting their management know their grievances and other worries at work. Team bonding exercises also can work by creating avenues of cooperation and communication between each other.

Set your boundaries. If you find yourself in a conversation with others where they want to pass on information about another, politely stop and let them know that you will have to pass that information on to the “victim”. Offer to help them formulate a way of facilitating a conversation between themselves (gossiper) and “victim”. Two statements that can be used to deter gossip:

“I have absolutely no opinion about that at all.” This is a refusal to engage and it is done. You just to remember not to engage after stating that.

“Let me help you formulate a conversation to have with them (victim).” Help them (gossiper) with organizing their thoughts and words so that they can tell the other person (victim) directly.

Address the content not the process. If you are the “victim” of gossip, talk to the gossiper, address the content of the gossip. Be humble. Ask for feedback to the content of the gossip. Demonstrate and openness to listen and accept this feedback. Even if the person states that it was just a “misunderstanding” or minimizes their statements, reiterate you need for feedback.

Change the subject if you come across gossip. Start talking about something that you saw on TV last night or while driving home. What did you hear on the radio? What is your favorite song or what you are having for your next meal.

Say something positive about the “victim”. Let the others, that are gossiping about that person, know something good that they (victim) had done for you or someone else.

Address the “lead” gossip. Talk to this person, in a private area, with specific examples of how the conversation can hurt not only the victim, but also the team as a whole.

WHEN SOMEONE IS BEING BULLIED

When you witness bullying you can help, by taking the following steps.

- **Offer support** to the person that is being bullied.
- **Listen.** Allow them to talk to you about what is going on.
- **Report.** Give your account of what you witnessed.
- **Stay close.** Having a supportive co-worker around will help the victim feel “safe”

***Disclaimer: This information is for educational purposes only. If you feel like you are the victim of bullying or gossip, you can see a member of management or you can call FDL EAP at (218) 878-7514 or (715) 390-4993.**