GOSSIP RUMORS & WORKPLACE BUSYBODIES

Executive Summary

Learn about how gossip, rumors, and busybodies negatively impact your company. Fun Team Building has very doable yet tricky steps to bring your workplace into a positive, safe environment where actual team building can begin.

Gossip

Gossip is often part of routine workplace dynamics. It is generally engaged where participants have personal relationships, and it does not make sense to those outside the group. For example, it is more likely to occur between co-workers in a department or employees on the plant floor but does not

cross the line between department and plant floor employees, even if they are in the same company.

Sometimes it is hard to distinguish between chit-chat and gossip. There are two questions to answer regarding gossip:

1. Would you have difficulty telling this story if the person you are speaking about was standing there?
2. Has the conversation turned harmful, inflammatory, or embarrassing about the person?

If you answered yes to either of these, you have entered the gossip zone.

Why Gossip Happens

Gossip often occurs to drive someone out of the organization. It enlists co-workers to collude in a relentless psychological terror campaign against a hapless target. Targets usually differ from the organizational norm or someone who somehow threatens the person's job, shape, or form.

The Impact of Gossip in the Workplace

If gossip is becoming the norm in your organization, here is its long-term impact of it:

- There will be a gradual decline in trust or morale among employees. Remember, what is being said about others, is probably told about you. This causes employees to distrust each other because no one understands what is true.
- Work productivity is impacted because people get caught up in the drama. When you see people gathering in hushed voices, you know gossip is taking place, which can take employees' attention away from the task at hand.

1. **Set an example.**
   Don't gossip yourself. Remind people of the consequences of this situation and walk away.

2. **Let your boss know.**
   Management should know about the gossip and who is spreading it. Be sure to tell them who was there and what was said about another individual.

3. **Enact consequences for spreading gossip.**
   Hold yearly training seminars, new employee onboarding, and, if necessary, monthly staff meetings addressing gossip's negative impact. Let employees know, If you can prove they were the gossiper, they will receive a written warning, and the second time it occurs, they will be terminated.

4. **Keep your private life private.**
   Don't share details about your life with others at work, especially if you are new. Disclose personal information only to those you know are to be trusted.

5. **Make [Mastering Civility: A Manifesto for the Workplace](#) required reading for all employees.** This will allow them to see how their civility can help stop gossip in its tracks.

6. **Be a STOP SIGN to Gossip.**
   You do not have to listen. You do not have to agree. Instead, request the gossiper to change the subject OR say something positive.
   Take a deep breath and be grateful you are not that person.

Rumors

Rumors, the repetition of information that is unsubstantiated by evidence, can be equally devastating to organizations. Usually, there is a kernel of truth in the tale, but the information has become exponentially worse (i.e., more layoffs and plant closings).

Unlike gossip, rumors occur as an act of public communication. Here is an example of a rumor that was put to bed by Meg Whitman, CEO of Hewlett-Packard Enterprise:

"Normally, I do not comment on rumors, but the speculation about my future and Uber has become a distraction. So, let me make this as clear as I can. I am fully committed to HPE and plan to remain your CEO."

Why Rumors Spread

Usually, they are spread to quell the person's fears and anxieties about the future. In addition, the person applying them is looking for verification from others about the authenticity of the rumor. If others agree (even if they don't know),

But truth be told, organizational uncertainty is always going to happen. Companies merge, employees are laid off, projects are abandoned, and departments are reorganized. As a result, uncertainty is more prevalent now than before.

The Impact of Rumors

- Rumors create negative energy and a decline in worker morale
- Undercut the integrity of the organization because letting them happen says upper management tolerates lying
- Create a hostile work environment because people are uncertain about their future with the organization

What to Do About Rumors

1. **Communicate.**
   Clear communication from the top puts an end to rumors. But, even with confidential or disheartening information, there is a way to let employees know about it to feel more in control. Give them as much information as possible without breaking confidentiality agreements and listen and respond to their concerns.
2. **Educate employees about the impact of rumors on morale.**
   Create an open-door policy where employees can convey the stories they have heard without feeling judged. Once they have an outlet and management genuinely shows they care, rumors are less likely to be spread.
3. **Provide quarterly forums where employees can talk about rumors.**
   This will allow the more introverted employees to hear management's response to any stories without talking to their manager directly.
4. **Remind them no one has all the details.**
   Apart from the CEO and shareholders of the company, it is unlikely that management has all the details of the comings and goings of the organization. Much, unfortunately, is outside of the department head's control. Employees need to feel empowered to sharpen their saw, so they are prepared as much as possible if something happens.

Workplace Busybodies: The Gossiper and Rumormonger

Usually, one or two individuals in the company are the bad apples responsible for most of the damage listed above. Their mission (as they see it) is to spread their behavior to others and bring the organization to all-time low morale.

Much Ado About Busybodies

There are a variety of ways to deal with busybodies. Some will stop their behavior when it is brought to their attention, and they are given the tools to improve. Others will not accept they have a problem.

Remember, management must deal with these individuals. Ignoring a busybody's behavior is kin to putting gasoline on a fire. They will interpret avoidance as acceptance. Here are five viable tactics to deal with them:

1. **Offer help.** Perhaps the individual is having issues in their personal life, causing them to act this way. Then, dig a little deeper and offer Employee Assistance Program (EAP) services to help them through stressful situations.
2. **Give direct feedback.** Tell them the impact they are having on others. For example, share their behavior you have personally observed, or behavior employees have witnessed and documented.
3. **Show the documentation.** Give them formal complaints and peer reviews that highlight toxic behaviors. Deal with concrete examples and give tangible ways to stop this behavior.
4. **Isolate them**. Sometimes termination is not possible due to union regulations or the risk of a lawsuit. Instead, make the employees virtual, rearrange desks, or reassign them to low-profile projects.
5. **Fire them.** While this may seem like a harsh tactic, one bad apple can decrease productivity by 30-40 percent in your organization. Can you afford this type of hit?

Real-Life Example of Dealing with a Busybody

I was asked to facilitate a team-building seminar for an office with poor morale. The boss said he needed to boost confidence, build relationships and promote teamwork. I asked him if there were any toxic persons in his organization, and he said, "One."

I asked why he didn't fire her, and he said she had 14 years of tenure and did not want to be the bad guy. He then told me about all the gossiping and rumor-mongering she does daily.

I told him he was wasting his time if he hired me. I said I could do a good job, but it would only be a temporary fix with her in the picture.

He offered more money. I still said no.

Two days later, he called to say he fired the person and never felt better. However, the benefit was almost immediate; he hired me to conduct a team-building day, his staff became happy, and his business is very successful now.

About Fun Team Building with Larry Lipman

Larry Lipman is an Atlanta-based team-building success coach that has helped countless individuals form new bonds through his workplace team-making interactive activities. Larry's broad topics include trust-building activities, appreciation, cooperation, responsibility and blame, expectations, value systems, and teamwork ideas.