

# the ADVISOR

RESOURCES FOR SUPERVISORS, MANAGERS, AND HUMAN RESOURCES PERSONNEL

# Workplace Gossip

Is gossip a problem in your workplace?

It's common for people to say they dislike gossip. Yet the reality is that gossip is a normal part of human interaction. When people don't know details about a situation or event, it's not unusual for them to speculate or derive a theory based on hearsay.

When gossip occurs in the workplace, it's often in the form of the "rumor mill" or "office grapevine." Some of what is said through these informal methods of communication is harmless and may even streamline workplace functioning. Unfortunately, malicious or destructive gossip may also take root, leading to

conflict and hurt feelings. It can even contribute to bullying, harassment, and a hostile work environment.

One way to determine if a workplace conversation is crossing the line into gossip is to ask yourself the following questions:

- ▶ **Is it productive?** Does sharing this information help people do their jobs?
- ▶ **Is it relevant?** Does discussing this subject serve a useful purpose, or is it just idle chatter?

- ▶ **Is it respectful?** Would your team or individual members want to talk about this subject in front of other people, particularly those directly involved in the situation?

If the answer to one or more of these questions is "no," then the topic may be inappropriate.

While almost any topic can be fodder for workplace gossip, those that tend to provide the most fertile ground include:

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- ▶ Change in the workplace
- ▶ The departure of a manager or colleague, particularly if it is sudden or happens under mysterious circumstances
- ▶ Conflict between individual employees or cliques
- ▶ Unusual or disruptive behavior in the workplace

Once started, gossip may be difficult to stop. While there are many reasons for this, some of the most common include:

- ▶ **It confers status.** Knowledge is often a powerful commodity in the workplace. Spreading gossip or passing along “insider information” is a way of cultivating power or influence.
- ▶ **It’s contagious.** Gossip often spreads like wildfire. This may happen because people need to vent about work-related frustrations, or because they feel the

need to give colleagues a “heads-up” about events on the horizon. Sometimes, gossip spreads because people have seen or heard something that makes for an interesting story.

- ▶ **It stems from uncertainty or frustration.** Gossip often takes root when a team or workplace is coping with change or when they are struggling with a difficult situation. Gossip may be an indication that people are trying to gather information any way they can.

When destructive gossip occurs, it’s important to confront it quickly. (See “How Do I Say That?” on the next page for suggestions.) Start with these helpful resources:

- ▶ **Human Resources** can help you review any relevant policies related to harassment, appropri-

ate workplace behavior, and professional ethics.

- ▶ **LifeMatters** can offer consultation and assistance with addressing the concern, as well as assist with making referrals for affected employees.

In addition, the following steps may help discourage the behavior:

- ▶ **Be a role model.** If an employee shares private, personal information with you, keep it on a “need to know” basis. Encourage employees to extend the same courtesy to their co-workers if that information is revealed to a team or work group.
- ▶ **Expect professional behavior.** Make it clear that gossip is unacceptable and that treating others with respect is a performance expectation. In addition, encourage your team to work through conflicts in a polite manner.
- ▶ **Keep the lines of communication open.** Gossip often starts when there is an information vacuum. Give your team as much information as possible, particularly when change is on the horizon. Check in with individual team members on a periodic basis as well. Encourage questions and maintain an open door policy.

The LifeMatters Management Consultation Service is available to help you both manage gossip and cope with its impact. Call 24/7/365.

# How Do I Say That? Addressing Gossip

Malicious gossip puts your organization at risk. If an individual employee or group is being targeted by gossip and it isn't addressed promptly, it could result in complaints of harassment or contribute to a hostile work environment.

If inappropriate or hurtful rumors are spreading around your workplace, try these tips:

1. Review your company's policies regarding harassment. Document what you know or have observed, then consult with Human Resources. The LifeMatters Management Consultation Service is also available to discuss your concern.
2. If the facts are fuzzy or it is unclear who is involved, it may be best to address the situation generally, at least to start. This can be done by communicating to the entire work group or team without singling out anyone. Remind your team that gossip undermines morale, creates "emotional danger," and is unacceptable. Let everyone know that if malicious gossip occurs, it will be dealt with according to company policy, and that this may involve disciplinary action.
3. If you know the source of the gossip, this approach may be helpful:



- ▶ Meet privately with the team member and communicate your concern. While you may be personally disappointed with the individual's behavior, it's important to stay focused on the workplace impact.

**Sample language:** "Spreading rumors is hurtful and is not acceptable in our workplace."

- ▶ Give the person time to ask questions and respond. Embarrassment and anger are common reactions, so don't be surprised if the person becomes emotional.
- ▶ Describe the workplace impact. Make it clear that gossip is inappropriate and refer the person to any applicable company policies.

**Sample language:** "Gossip creates unnecessary tension in our workplace. It also makes it harder for people to trust each other and work together."

- ▶ Provide clear expectations for future behavior. Again, keep the focus on workplace performance, not your personal feelings about the employee's actions.

**Sample language:** "If you have been spreading rumors, I expect it to stop now. If others try to draw you into an inappropriate conversation, I urge you to stay out of it. Remind your colleagues that this behavior is not acceptable."



- ▶ Outline the consequences of further gossip or other inappropriate behavior. Prior to the meeting, confirm what next steps will be taken if the behavior continues.

**Sample language:** “If additional complaints are received and an investigation reveals that you are involved, (state disciplinary action).”

- ▶ Schedule a follow-up meeting.

**Sample language:** “Let’s talk again next week after you’ve had time to think things over.”

- ▶ Document the meeting. Review the situation with HR and verify any next steps. Always talk to HR before taking any disciplinary action.

The LifeMatters Management Consultation Service can help with determining the difference between the workplace rumor mill and the sort of malicious gossip that could lead to complaints about harassment or a hostile work environment. It can also help you cope with your own feelings about gossip and other hurtful behavior. Help is available 24/7/365.

## Management Consultation

LifeMatters is available to help with:

- ▶ Confronting an employee about performance issues
- ▶ An employee’s personal problem
- ▶ Suspected drug or alcohol use on the job
- ▶ Interpersonal conflicts between team members
- ▶ Establishing clear, attainable expectations for performance
- ▶ Addressing crisis situations, such as a violent incident, the death of an employee, or a natural disaster
- ▶ Your own personal concerns
- ▶ Any other work-related issue

LifeMatters offers professional management consultation when you need it, as often as you need it. Call anytime.

Call the **LifeMatters®** by Empathia Management Consultation Service toll-free anytime. **1-800-367-7474**

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