"Hey, Did You Hear About…"

Isn't the world we live in a curious place? In my humble opinion, it's a world of utter and ongoing amazement full of change and wonder often driven by the latest and newest technological advancements. From the phone you cradle in the palm of your hand to the high-definition big screen television laid out in front of you and family to the latest safety features in your car or truck, we have it all…don't we? And yet as much as we have evolved in some ways, when it comes to how we interact and treat each other it hasn't changed very much at all.

Take human behaviour as an example. Ever since people came together to accomplish work and work in teams and groups, managers and supervisors, HR managers and departments have struggled with enduring behaviors that have sadly stood the test of time. And I what appears to many of us as a world moving forward in some ways, we are still searching for lasting solutions for issues such as workplace bullying, toxic and difficult people, and gossiping.

But what is gossip and why is it so invasive in our workplace environments. As I see it gossip and gossiping seem to have many definitions but one that clarifies it is *"idle talk or rumor, especially about the personal or private affairs of others"*. It exists and even thrives because all other arguments aside, it is it seemingly allowed and condoned mainly because of our own inaction to address it.

Once in a while when boundaries are crossed and someone is hurt or even devastated by a gossip, management will take short term action by talking to the parties involved, reminding everyone of the values the organization holds dear and to make a personal and professional commitment nor to engage in further gossip. However, gossip and gossiping are very deep rooted and a human behaviour that returns again and again.

Gossip wastes everyone's time, it harms overall morale, it isolates, it damages reputations, it distracts from more important work. It is a corrosive, negative and harmful behaviour that started likely in the school yard and like any entrenched habits, has now almost become an acceptable norm. Or at least you'd have to think it is as there are few organizations that actively confront incidents of gossip and presents corrective action.

Generally, most gossip exists in small and immediate circles of people and it spread virally through quiet, quick conversations. Depending on the nature of the "information" it can spread farther and deeper into an organization. Worse still gossip can have an on-line life and in an age of social media much like on-line bullying, gossip can spread virally well past the scope of an organization and into the community.

Furthermore, gossip and the hurt feelings that victimization of gossiping causes really fall into the broader definition of workplace harassment. Can we say that like bullying, gossip contributes to people feeling diminished, disrespected and even unsafe, in a workplace that should in every case should be welcoming, safe and built on a foundation of mutual respect? If an assault occurs at work, there is a process and immediate action is taken. If someone is harassed in any way, there are consequences and a process to report and address it. But what of gossip? If someone has become a target of lies and misinformation and cruel remarks, what is their recourse?

Let's take a moment and try to empathize with those who have been the targets of gossip. Of course, those who have been on the other side of gossip will have much to reflect on in terms of being victimized by gossip. Nevertheless, try to feel for someone who knows that they are or have been the source for side talk and secret conversations. And imagine working everyday in the environment that this is all happening, they still have to work side-by-side and interact with the same people. Imagine how minimally it is awkward it would be and maximally how humiliating it would seem. Especially when trust is required for collaboration, partnerships and a sense of team and community.

Long term victimization can have personal costs that lead to mental health issues, absenteeism, reduced productivity, reduced morale, and emotional distress. In other words, well beyond the emotional distress of those who become targets of gossip, there are the financial costs of everyone's time being wasted. And in an age when maximizing productivity and efficiency, time wasting gossip and addressing and resolving its fallout is time that could be used in some many more productive and positive ways.

Victims of gossip and those affected indirectly by its negativity leads to greater employee disengagement which in terms affects every element of business including *internal and external customer service, working together as a team and being supportive.*

It is in the best interest of every business and organization to ensure that their employees work in the workplace free of gossiping (and other negative, unproductive behaviours).

Just as we would address incidents of bullying, harassment, and other inappropriate behaviours, especially when they are hurtful and can make someone feel unsafe and disrespected, gossip MUST be addressed.

I like to think that **"what we permit, we promote".** Let's consider what progressive and thoughtful organizations that wish to ensure a respect-based culture based on fairness, inclusion and that all are valued, all feel that they belong, that all feel safe at work and that the message around gossip and gossiping is that there is no room for it and that it cannot and will not be permitted.

Update your company or organizational policies

Start at the beginning …with a vision of what ultimately you would like to realize. Just as you would have updated or created clear workplace policies for workplace harassment, create and outline clear consequences for workplace gossiping. Ensure that all managers and supervisory staff know that gossip has no place in a workplace rooted in positive values and it begins with it becoming policy…and a policy that can then be quoted in future conversations and meetings with staff.

Establish clear and define boundaries

Managers and supervisors can start by leading a discussion with employees around the need for boundaries with an open conversation around the inappropriateness of gossiping. Might be helpful to cite examples of what gossiping entails. If staff are unwilling or uncomfortable to do this, create a process where they can anonymously submit their thoughts and ideas. Once collected, use this information to drive a conversation in a team setting.

Enforce your new policies

This will take a full management team approach but addressing and enforcing the message around how gossiping will have no place in your workplace will take time and repetition. Managers and supervisors really must be confident and supported to take action and speak to those they learn are gossiping. Initially, perhaps all that is needed is some direct conversation and a reiteration of the newly implemented policies. Later, if necessary, firmer, and more direct warnings may be needed.

Conduct specific staff meetings address gossip directly

The message needs to come directly from the highest people, and they need to be very clear about the company or organization position on gossip and the steps going forward. The message of addressing gossip at staff meetings can reinforce both the organization's values but to also remind all that gossip is taken seriously and we are engaging all staff at all times to bring better behaviors to bear every day at work.

More open and transparent team meetings

Up the frequency (RE: team meetings/ memos…etc.) and depth / clarity of information provided to employees. Workplace gossip and rumours are fed when there is a lack of information.
Improved two-way communication – employees have a place and time to ask questions and have the needed information that squashes poor or partial information or facts. Any company or organization that is truly interested and invested in creating and maintaining a healthy, safe, and productive (profitable) work environment should address and correct / mitigate the proliferation of workplace gossip.

Finally, the bottom line is that gossip will starve in an environment in which people learn to either challenge it, ignore it, or report it. If everyone from those in the highest positions downward start to consciously start to see gossip as a behaviour detrimental to the organizational good and a behaviour that affects wellness, workplace productivity and harmony, we might finally see gossip become an endangered species along with other unpleasant behaviours.

In the end, people of good character and those rooted deeply in good values are ultimately going to become gossip destroyers. When we challenge gossip when we hear it, and learn to defend those who are targeted, then gossip will become seen as a behaviour that has no rewards or worth to the gossiper.

Turning the tables on gossip begins as simply as saying to a gossiper "Why would you say that about…?" or "Why do you feel that way about…? Tell the gossiper that his / her gossip makes you feel uncomfortable and that what they want to share with you isn't of interest to you and doesn't have a place at work.

Just remember, those who feel free and even empowered to spread gossip or to pass on gossip to you can be the same people who in time will pass on gossip about you.

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