

HEARING IT THROUGH THE GRAPEVINE:
POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE WORKPLACE GOSSIP

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June 28, 2011

David Jodoin, the Town Administrator for the small New Hampshire town of Hooksett, was upset. It had come to his attention that he and a fellow city employee were the targets of workplace gossip. The gossip revolved around the type of relationship David had with the employee, who happened to be of the opposite sex. David believed that the clear implication of this gossip was that he and the employee were having an affair. A married father of two children, David found this gossip to be personally and professionally damaging, so he informed the Town Council, which promptly ordered an investigation into the matter. The investigator concluded that the actions of four individuals, the “Hooksett Four,” warranted disciplinary action, resulting in the firing of these four city employees. The Town Council issued a statement indicating that the gossip of the four terminated employees had been spread as part of a “conscious and concerted effort to damage reputations, to spread untrue stories with the knowledge that they were not true and evidently to retaliate for some perceived preferential treatment.” The incident caused difficulty for David both in his career and in his family life.

Contrast the story above with the following story that was reported by the *Montreal Gazette*. Joy, an office assistant interviewed by the *Gazette*, explains that although gossip can be dangerous, it can also be helpful. “It’s hard,” says Joy “to do your job if you aren’t hip to what’s really going on.” Not long ago a co-worker informed Joy that her boss is having an affair. Joy is glad to have received this particular piece of gossip. She feels that the knowledge about her boss helps her to manage her job more effectively. Joy explains, “By knowing the true picture, I can figure things out when my boss doesn’t return my calls or he disappears for three hours.”

I. The Nature of Gossip

The two stories above illustrate how complex the issue of workplace gossip can be. Although in both cases the content of the gossip was similar, the outcomes associated with the gossip were very different. Gossip can be a tricky organizational phenomenon in that it can be both positive and negative at the same time, and this often depends on whether one is viewing the gossip from the employee's perspective or the organization's perspective. Consider the following example. Amanda is a project manager charged with assembling a cross-functional team to spearhead the development of a new product. Recruiting talented engineers within the organization will be critical to the success of this new venture. Amanda is considering approaching Louis, an engineer who has enjoyed some success on previous cross-functional teams, to be a part of the group. Before discussing the matter with Louis, however, Amanda raises the issue with a trusted co-worker, Ron. Ron knows Louis better than Amanda, and he tells her that he believes Louis is going through some difficulties in his personal life and may not be able to concentrate on his work for some time into the future. After hearing this from Ron, Amanda attempts to recruit Louis, but isn't surprised to hear that Louis turns down the assignment. From Louis's perspective it would appear that Ron was negatively gossiping about him. Indeed, it might be upsetting to Louis if he were to learn about the exchange. This type of gossip between Amanda and Ron could potentially lead to interpersonal conflict and hostile relations within the organization. If we look at it from another perspective though, this exchange may have been very helpful to the organization as a whole. Assuming that Ron's assessment of Louis is accurate, the gossip exchange that occurred in this example saved Amanda from perhaps making an incorrect attribution about why Louis was turning down her offer. Rather than perhaps assuming that Louis might not support her or her project, Amanda recognized that there

might be external issues at play that Louis might not feel comfortable discussing with her directly. Thus, workplace gossip can have both positive and negative ramifications for organizations. Whether gossip results in enhanced organizational performance or in conflict and damaged relationships depends not only on the perspective from which one is viewing the situation, but also on the intentions behind the gossip. This article is intended to provide managers with a deeper understanding of the various functions gossip serves within organizations. We argue that gossip is a fundamental human activity that will never be completely eliminated from the workplace. It can, however, be managed to some extent. We therefore conclude with a discussion of practical actions managers can take to encourage an optimal gossip environment. Before we proceed, however, we will provide a definition of, and some general background on, gossip.

What is gossip? As Michelson, van Iterson, and Waddington explain in their recent article in the journal *Group and Organization Management*, there have been a number of gossip definitions over the years as researchers from diverse disciplines have studied the subject. Although there isn't complete agreement on a definition, there is enough consensus to settle upon a set of minimum criteria for what constitutes gossip. For a social exchange to be considered gossip we argue that it must be evaluative talk (i.e., concerned with making judgments) between two or more persons about a third party that is absent from the conversation. Beyond that definition we can also distinguish between different types of gossip. A common distinction that is often found in the study of gossip has to do with the nature of its content. Is the information being exchanged about the absent party generally constructive or destructive? Are the gossips praising or blaming the target of their communication? We can therefore specify the content of the gossip as being positive, negative, or neutral. As we explain below, the credibility

of the gossip being communicated as well as how work-related the gossip is also both have important ramifications. Our definition distinguishes gossip from rumor, a concept that is often thought to be synonymous with gossip. In their book *Rumor and Gossip: The Social Psychology of Hearsay*, Rosnow and Fine describe the subtle differences between the two concepts. Whereas rumors can be either about persons or events, gossip is strictly about other individuals that are typically personally known by both the gossiper and the gossip recipient. Thus, speculation about a potential organizational merger (an event) or the latest news about the exploits of a celebrity (a third party this is not personally known) would be categorized as rumor. In addition, whereas gossip may or may not be based on a known fact, rumor is always unsubstantiated, making its validity less certain. Despite these subtle differences, there exists considerable overlap between the two concepts, and there are many instances where a social exchange can be considered to be both an example of gossip and rumor. Many scholars have noted that gossip and rumor are mutually generative of one another. Moreover, the relational ties through which gossip is disseminated are often the same ties that convey rumor. While the focus of this article is primarily on gossip, our discussion will at times also extend to include rumor due to the interrelation between the two concepts.

Who gossips? The ubiquity of gossip in organizations makes it an activity that every manager will have to contend with throughout his or her career. Our research on organizations in both the United States and Western Europe suggests that over 90% of the workforce engages in at least some gossip activity on the job. Furthermore, in contrast to popular gender stereotypes, men engage in gossip with just as many people as women do. Although the content of gossip among men and women differs, the frequency appears to be similar. Men may label their gossip exchanges with such colloquialisms as “shooting the breeze,” “chewing the fat,” or

“bullshitting,” but this only amounts to a semantic tactic that makes their communication appear more socially acceptable. Anthropological studies have demonstrated that gossip is prevalent in cultures around the world, so it is not a practice that is specific to any one group or region. Researchers such as Robin Dunbar who take an evolutionary perspective argue that gossip became pervasive among early humans because it played a crucial role in maintaining social groups by fostering cohesion and helping to police deviant behavior. We can thus surmise that gossip has been with us for a long time and is sure to be a part of life well into the future, both inside and outside of organizations. It is thus necessary for managers to understand this most human of activities. Because it is essentially impossible to eliminate gossip by imposing a simple edict or anti-gossip policy, managers need to understand gossip at a deep level if they hope to manage it in the workplace. Given that sharing gossip can come at a social cost, its pervasiveness in organizations means that it must be providing some value to compensate for the risk. Indeed, individuals take the social risk of sharing gossip because it can serve certain beneficial functions. Towards this end, we now turn our attention to describing the primary functions served by gossip.

II. The Functions of Gossip

In the following section we discuss the six primary functions that gossip serves in organizational contexts. The six functions include: getting information, gaining influence, releasing pent-up emotions, providing intellectual stimulation, fostering interpersonal intimacy, and maintaining and enforcing group values and norms. It is important to note that any one gossip exchange can serve more than one function simultaneously.

Getting information. Provided that the gossip one receives is verifiable or is, at a minimum, coming from a trusted source, it can provide individuals in organizations with useful information. There are several reasons why gossip provides value above and beyond the more legitimate channels of formal communication that exist in the workplace. First, gossip can be timely. Information tends to move through informal communication networks with greater speed than when it travels through formal channels. The timeliness with which individuals receive information can often make the difference as to whether or not a manager can act on it. It doesn't matter how reliable the information is if a manager is getting it too late to respond effectively to it. Managers are often willing to sacrifice assurances of reliability in order to get timely information, and gossip is a primary vehicle by which this information travels. Consider the following words from Henry Mintzberg:

“Managers seem to cherish ‘soft’ information, especially gossip, hearsay, and speculation. Why? The reason is timeliness; today’s gossip may be tomorrow’s fact. The manager who is not accessible for the telephone call informing him that his biggest customer was seen golfing with his main competitor may read about a dramatic drop in sales in the next quarterly report. But then it’s too late.” (P. 13)

Gossip can be such an important source of up-to-the-minute information that managers sometimes cultivate elaborate networks of strategic “intelligence gatherers.” These individuals act as a manager’s eyes and ears in the field and immediately report back any gossip that might be of use to the organization and/or the manager. Indeed, we have found it to be the case that managers maintain larger gossip networks than lower level employees. Executive chef turned author and television personality Anthony Bourdain speaks of cultivating just such an intelligence network when working as a head chef. In *Kitchen Confidential*, Bourdain’s memoir of his time working in kitchens throughout New York City, he says:

“[Bourdain’s mentor, ‘Bigfoot’] taught me the value of a good, solid and independently reporting intelligence network, providing regular and confirmable reports that can be verified and cross-checked with other sources. I need to know, you see. Not just what’s happening in *my* kitchen, but across the street as well. Is my saucier unhappy? Is the chef across the street ready to make a pass, maybe take him away from me at an inopportune moment? *I need to know!* Is the saucier across the street unhappy? maybe *he*’s available. I need to know that, too. Is the cute waitress

who works Saturday nights screwing my broiler man? Maybe they've got a scam running: food going out without [properly accounting for it]! I have to know everything, you see. What might happen, what could happen, what will happen. And I have to be prepared for it, whatever it is." (P. 101, original emphasis).

Second, gossip is a relatively inexpensive way to gather information. Gossip can be an efficient means by which to get updates about those in one's social network. For example, Ron tells Louis about the latest "news" regarding Amanda, whom Louis rarely speaks directly with. Because Louis rarely speaks with Amanda, the gossip related to him by Ron is likely to be the only way he would have received that information. In some cases the information will be trivial. In other instances, however, it may end up being very useful. The psychologists Sarah Wert and Peter Salovey also make the important point that gossip enables easy social comparisons because it provides an individual with information about third parties that would have been quite costly to gather directly. For example, it would be awkward for Jim to ask Aaron directly about his compensation, but it is conceivably less awkward for him to ask his close friend David (who happens to have this information) about Aaron's pay. With this information in hand, Jim can begin to think about how equitably he is being paid.

Third, gossip provides employees with information that is not available through formal channels. Gossip, rumor, and other forms of informal social exchange among employees often fill in the gaps when information from management is either disingenuous or is wholly lacking. Gossip and rumor are sometimes the only means by which employees can obtain information about the happenings in an organization. In her analysis of gossip and rumor at a Korean-owned manufacturing firm in the United Kingdom, Linda Glover found exactly this phenomenon to be occurring. Although the firm had a number of communication-related human resources management (HRM) practices in place to keep the workforce informed, the firm's employees believed these official channels of communication to be unfairly manipulated by senior

management. Glover explains that the senior management had previously been guilty of withholding information regarding an imminent downsizing and lying to employees about it when questioned by them. The trust employees had in information provided by senior management was destroyed when the employees eventually learned the truth regarding the downsizing. With all formal sources of information in the firm suspect, gossip and rumor was seen by employees as one of the most effective forms of communication available. This is the kind of situation that breeds excessive amounts of gossip and rumor within an organization. Indeed, we have seen in our own research a similar case where organizational change led to a breach of trust in management, which led to an increase in negative gossip about managers of the firm. It is also important to note that gossip can provide employees with information about the culture, norms, and expectations that are unique to each organization. This is an issue we will treat in greater detail below.

Gaining influence. Nancy Kurland and Lisa Hope Pelled argue that gossip can affect the amount of informal power one has within an organization. Power in this context can be thought of as an individual's ability to influence others to do things that they would not otherwise do. The individual who always knows the latest juicy piece to gossip is seen by his or her peers as being well-connected in the workplace social network and therefore influential. Our own empirical research supports the idea that individuals who gossip the most in organizations are seen by their peers as being highly influential. Individuals can use gossip to change or affect attitudes and opinions about others. This makes the process of gossip a process of social influence. For example, Amanda critiquing the abilities of Ron in front of Nagesh, Anna, and Justin could have an important influence on the perceptions that these three individuals have of Ron. Gossip can greatly affect the reputations of individuals in organizations, for better or for

worse, and that is powerful. Indeed, there are a number of anecdotes from the organizational culture literature that highlight how gossip can circulate throughout an organization and turn into a lasting legend that has significant effects upon the reputations of the individuals involved.

Gossip can be used by individuals and groups that occupy positions of low status to exert informal power. It can be an effective tool to manipulate the actions of those in positions of authority. In her ethnographic observations of Japanese organizational life, Yuko Ogasawara noted that female “office ladies” used gossip in this way. Gender inequality was still very much evident in Japanese organizations at the time of Ogasawara’s research. Females were typically employed as office ladies (OLs), which is a low status administrative position in Japanese companies. Their limited scope of responsibility and meager compensation stood in contrast to males, who were the only ones to occupy positions of power and prestige. Ogasawara describes how the OLs in the company she was observing occupied much of their free time with gossip. Most of the OL gossip was targeted at the males in the company. The gossip ranged from comments about the appearance of the men to how well each man treated the OLs when requesting administrative support. In her observations, Ogasawara found that gossip among the OLs circulated quickly and widely. Moreover, whenever an OL heard negative gossip about a man she began to take a dim view of him. Most managers in the firm agreed that being disliked by one OL was tantamount to being disliked by them all. As one manager remarked, “If one girl decides that this man is no good, then all the girls start thinking in the same way”(P. 84). Being disliked by the OLs made it extremely difficult for a man to get quality administrative support, not to mention the damage it did to his reputation among his fellow male co-workers. As one would imagine, the males in this firm feared the gossip among OLs and therefore made attempts to stay on their good side by doing things like frequently taking them to lunch and even bringing

them expensive gifts from their business trips abroad. This case provides a good example of how one relatively low status group can use gossip to counterbalance formal power differentials.

Gossip can also be used as a strategic means by which to enhance one's own status. In a series of laboratory experiments, Francis McAndrew and colleagues found that individuals tend to spread positive information about friends and relatives and negative information about enemies and rivals. It is easy to see how one's status might be elevated as one basks in the reflected glory of a close friend, or as one makes light of the flaws of a rival. In summary, gossip leads to influence because it can alter reputations, cause recipients to view gossipers as more powerful, and elevate the relative status of strategic gossipers.

Releasing pent-up emotions. Gossiping with another about an especially tense relationship or about an especially difficult person can serve as an emotional outlet for the gossipers. Gossip can thus serve as a kind of safety valve whereby an individual can "vent" to another person. This venting can help to reduce stress and feelings of anxiety. Two co-workers who commiserate with one another about how unfair their boss is find it a little easier to deal with the situation after talking to one another. This is especially so when the gossipers cannot directly address the third party that is the target of the gossip. For example, the norms of professionalism in most organizations prevent employees from being confrontational with customers and other external (as well as internal) stakeholders. Gossip "behind closed doors" with a trusted other is often a means by which employees deal with the stress and frustration caused by such professional norms. In their work on gossip in the nursing profession, Kathryn Waddington and Clive Fletcher address the relationship between gossip and emotion. These researchers describe the pressure that nurses are under to ensure that their outward expressions of emotion remain in accordance with professional and organizational norms. For example, nurses

are expected to remain courteous toward a patient no matter how demanding or difficult the patient is. This emotional regulation is typically referred to as *emotional labor*. High levels of emotional labor indicate that there is a discrepancy between what an individual is feeling internally and the emotion that he or she must display. Waddington and Fletcher found that nurses used gossip as a way to cope with the stress caused by emotional labor. Emotional labor, however, is not unique to the nursing field. It exists in many professions where employees are expected to conform to certain behavioral scripts and to maintain certain emotional displays, such as in the retail and service sectors where face-to-face contact with the general public is common. It is therefore not unusual to see gossip serving this purpose across a wide range of industries.

Providing intellectual stimulation. Informal communication such as gossip is an activity that can intellectually stimulate employees. This is an especially important function for individuals who work in monotonous jobs that require little variety or cognitive challenge. A number of studies have shown that factory workers rely upon gossip and banter to “keep from going nuts.” Sociologist Donald F. Roy wrote specifically about this in a classic article about a small group of machine operators in a Chicago factory. Roy himself spent two months doing the factory work, which consisted of “standing all day in one spot beside three old codgers in a dingy room looking out through barred windows at the bare walls of a brick warehouse” with “intellectual activity reduced to computing the hours until quitting time” (P. 160). Roy found, however, that the workers in this factory kept their minds active with an array of informal communications, including gossip. Roy soon came to realize that these informal communications made it easy for him to endure 12 hour shifts of exceedingly boring work. It is of particular relevance here to note that one of the highlights of the workers’ day was when the “pickup man”

would make his daily call to pick up completed materials for further processing in another part of the factory. The pickup man was important because he brought with him news and gossip about all the other workers throughout the factory. Roy concludes his study by observing the important function played by communication forms like gossip: “The enjoyment of communication for ‘its own sake’... brings job satisfaction, at least job endurance, to work situations largely bereft of creative experience” (P. 166). Thus, gossip can play an important role in preventing boredom, perhaps even misery, for workers in certain occupations.

Fostering interpersonal intimacy. The exchange of gossip between two employees is a way to form and maintain relationships within an organization. Moreover, certain forms of gossip can bring individuals closer together. Research shows that individuals who share their negative attitudes about third parties feel closer to one another as a result. The transmission of negative gossip requires a trusting relationship. Indeed, in our own research we find that negative gossip tends to only be shared among friends and not among casual co-workers or acquaintances. A gossiper must feel assured that a potential gossip recipient will not misuse the sensitive information inherent to negative gossip as such misuse could have negative consequences for the originator of the gossip. For example, Ron’s relationships and general reputation could suffer if he decides to trust Amanda with negative gossip regarding the personal life of Louis but Amanda then betrays that trust by disseminating the gossip to many others throughout the organization. When an individual divulges negative gossip a message is implicitly sent to the recipient that the gossiper trusts him or her, and this is an effective way to strengthen a bond between two people. Trust and intimacy is therefore both a cause and a consequence of certain forms of gossip. Although the content of the gossip may not be beneficial to the greater organization—in fact it may be quite harmful—it is likely serving an intimacy function for the individuals exchanging it.

Maintaining and enforcing group values and norms. The gossip that gets circulated within work teams, divisions, and organizations says a lot about the culture of those groups. For example, the gossip in highly competitive cultures is likely to be highly work-related and extremely critical, whereas the gossip in more collegial cultures is likely to be less critical and to include substantial amounts of personal gossip. Organizational gossip can also be indicative of what is acceptable within an organization and what isn't. If there is disapproving gossip circulating in the office that John went home yesterday before 7:00 pm without a valid reason, then one can infer that working long hours is the norm. As Max Gluckman has argued, gossip can maintain a group's norms and values by circulating judgmental information about deviant group members; the threat of becoming the target of disapproving gossip is often enough to prevent an individual from violating group norms. At the group level, gossip can therefore be an effective means by which to maintain conformity and control over individuals.

Kniffin and Wilson give an interesting example of how gossip serves to enforce norms within the context of a college rowing team. Rowing teams are inherently interdependent, which makes them particularly relevant to the study of gossip. Interdependency increases interest in gossip. We have found that there tends to be more gossip within teams where individuals must depend upon one another to accomplish goals. Rowing is very much a team-based sport where each team member's cooperation and effort is necessary for success. If one member doesn't show up to a meeting, then the entire team is unable to practice that day. There are therefore strict norms within rowing teams that are aimed at promoting cooperation and commitment. Kniffin and Wilson studied one such rowing team for a total of three semesters, and they observed and recorded all of the gossip interactions that transpired among this group of athletes. They explain in their case study that, during one of the semesters, there was one member of the

team who refused to “pull his weight.” This member, dubbed “the slacker,” regularly skipped team practices and was generally perceived to not work as hard as every other member of the team.

Kniffin and Wilson note that the negative gossip that was exchanged during the one semester that the slacker was on the team was drastically higher than the amount exchanged in the other two semesters of their study. The target of much of the negative gossip that semester was the slacker. In cases like this the negative gossip is serving two functions. First, it acts as a means to control deviant behavior. There were two things the slacker could do to end the negative gossip against him: 1) he could alter his behavior so as to conform to team norms, or 2) he could leave the team. In this case the deviant chose the latter course of action. Second, the gossip acted as a message to all other members of the team that such deviant behavior would not be tolerated. Any team member in this situation would surely think twice about skipping a practice session after witnessing the fate of the slacker.

III. Managing Organizational Gossip

Although gossip can serve many functions within an organization, it is not always the preferable means to achieve an end. For example, gossip has been shown to help relieve the stresses that occur as a result of emotional labor, but there likely exists a healthier mechanism by which employees can relieve this stress. Gossip is often used in organizations to serve a certain function because there is no better, more legitimate way to do so. There can be many negative side effects associated with gossip. For every dyad that grows closer by sharing negative gossip about somebody, there is the gossip target who could potentially suffer by learning about the exchange. For every individual who gains influence by maliciously making light of the mistake

made by a co-worker, there is a person who must contend with a damaged reputation. When taken to an extreme, negative gossip can create a hostile work environment for both the targets of gossip and even those who must listen to the gossip. We have seen negative gossip exacerbate negative relationships between two individuals and we have seen it perpetuate the social exclusion of low-status organizational “outcasts,” who are often the targets of negative gossip. Even trivial, “idle” gossip that is not meant to be negative or destructive can be a waste of company resources and a major distraction if it is taken to an extreme. It is not likely, however, that we will ever get rid of gossip in organizations, nor is that desirable. There are some forms of gossip that can be quite valuable, as seen in examples above. What a manager would ideally be able to do is to reduce all of the destructive and unnecessary forms of gossip while allowing the positive and functional forms of gossip to remain. In the section that follows, we will discuss some practices and some actions that managers can take that may help them accomplish that task.

Formally communicate information. The information void that results from a breakdown in formal communication is often filled by gossip and rumor. An uncertain marketplace and pending organizational change often create anxiety among employees, which makes effective managerial communication even more important in these circumstances. A number of studies have shown that both gossip and rumor substantially increase during times of organizational change, especially when organizational communication doesn’t address the concerns and uncertainties of the workforce. Clear, frequent, and—most importantly—sincere communication from management is an important antidote to excessive levels of negative gossip and rumor. Nicholas DiFonzo and Prashant Bordia highlight the importance of effective communication strategies in their case study of an organization undergoing a change. DiFonzo

and Bordia explain that, in one of his first company addresses, the newly hired CEO of the organization (“CorpB”) announced that his top management team would be examining ways to cut costs in several of CorpB’s business units. Naturally, this announcement was a cause for concern among employees of CorpB. As a result, CorpB headquarters experienced a flurry of calls from employees requesting further information. In response to this call for information, CorpB did several things. First, management informed employees of the extent of the layoffs to come. Second, management provided employees with a timeline for when layoff announcements would be made and they stuck to it. Third, management was very clear and honest with employees regarding the extent to which they could or could not reveal detailed information. Employees were always given an explanation as to why further information was not available; this was usually because either 1) management themselves didn’t know the answer, or 2) because divulging the information would adversely affect the company’s customer base. This proactive and honest communication strategy caused the requests for communication to quickly subside, and it also led to a substantial reduction in rumor and gossip circulating throughout the company.

DiFonzo and Bordia note that CorpB did a number of things right. First, the CEO made the announcement to employees early, thereby giving them time to adequately prepare for the pending change. Second, management established a clear timeline for when to expect information and stuck to it. Third, the top management team honestly explained their inability to provide further information. Fourth, managers attempted to learn about the concerns of employees by tapping into informal communication networks to find out what was being said “on the shop floor.” Finally, management involved the workforce in as much of the planning process as possible, thereby providing employees with some measure of control over the change. It is also important to note that this communication strategy was successful largely because the

managers of CorpB had a reputation for honestly communicating information to employees. As we saw above in Glover's case study of the Korean-owned manufacturing firm, trust among managers and employees is a necessary precondition for communication effectiveness.

Managerial communication isn't only important during times of major organizational change. There are plenty of uncertainties that arise among employees during the course of normal operations as well. Thus, managers would be well advised to encourage frequent and honest formal communication within their organizations no matter how stable the company is. A number of simple practices can be implemented to disseminate information, including: regular meetings between top management and all employees, frequent meetings at the team or department level, company newsletters, and e-mail and/or memos from top management to address employee questions and concerns.

Foster a culture of civility. In their book entitled *The Cost of Bad Behavior*, Christine Pearson and Christine Porath define workplace incivility as “the exchange of seemingly inconsequential inconsiderate words and deeds that violate conventional norms of workplace conduct” (P. 12). Examples of common uncivil workplace behaviors include—but are not limited to—the following: being condescending towards others, ignoring the opinions of others, blaming others for your mistakes, throwing tantrums when you don't get your way, making hurtful remarks to colleagues, and generally failing to be polite in social situations. Incivility in the workplace often provides the fodder for negative gossip in organizations: “*Did you hear about how Amy yelled at Christine in the staff meeting this morning?*” or “*You won't believe how poorly my boss treated me yesterday! Listen to this...*” No type of gossip seems to travel as far or be discussed so much as when it concerns incivility. Pearson and Porath also note how quickly a culture of incivility can spread within an organization, especially when senior managers are

exemplars of this kind of behavior. Incivility has a contagion-like effect that leaves negative emotion in its wake. Being the victim of incivility generates negative affect within a person and makes it more likely that he or she will, in turn, be uncivil to somebody, thereby perpetuating the chain of incivility. Research has found a number of negative outcomes associated with workplace incivility, and we argue that negative gossip is one of them. Thus, a significant amount of negative gossip can be eliminated by fostering a climate of civility.

How does one promote such a climate? Pearson and Porath offer a number of actionable suggestions to managers. First, training programs on interpersonal skills can be an effective means to reducing incivility. Courses about dealing with difficult people, conflict resolution, negotiation, and classes on effective communication skills would all be helpful in promoting more civility. Training on these topics would provide employees with the skills required to diplomatically deal with stressful interpersonal situations. Importantly, Pearson and Porath emphasize that such courses should be experiential in nature. For example, classes that involve role-play are especially effective in promoting retention and self-efficacy among students. A second suggestion for promoting a civil workplace is to implement 360° feedback surveys into the performance appraisal process. Supervisors are rarely subjected to the uncivil behaviors that their subordinates display. Moreover, victims of uncivil behavior rarely make formal complaints about the perpetrators of such behavior. This means that uncivil behavior is usually invisible to supervisors and is therefore not a factor in the traditional performance appraisal process. Uncivil behavior is therefore relatively easy to get away with in traditional systems. If, however, companies institute systems where they also collect anonymous input from an individual's peers and subordinates, then uncivil behavior can be more effectively monitored. Additionally, uncivil behavior has to be included as a dimension upon which employees are rated so that there are real

consequences associated with such behavior. Instituting 360° feedback surveys and making uncivil behavior a dimension upon which employees are rated are measures that an organization can take to begin to deter incivility. Finally, stringent selection procedures can be put in place to keep potential problem cases out of the organization in the first place. Few companies actually conduct effective background checks on their potential employees. Instead, recruiters rely solely on information provided by listed references and the candidate themselves. This selection process is rarely thorough enough to identify somebody who has a reputation for uncivil behavior. Recruiters and hiring managers should also employ their own networks as well as formal background checks before making hiring decisions.

Promote organizational justice. Ensuring that employees get treated fairly is a basic management function. Academics have been empirically studying fairness in the workplace—also known as organizational justice—since the 1960s. Since that time researchers have learned much about what leads to employee perceptions of organizational justice. One important form of organizational justice is procedural justice. *Procedural justice* is based on the perceived fairness of the procedures by which outcomes are determined and allocated. Employees feel unjustly treated when the decision rules that determine outcome distributions appear to be inequitable or illogical. Empirical studies show that procedural justice explanations mitigate the negative effects of uneven reward allocations in organizations. For example, the negative effects felt when only a fraction of a company's workforce gets an annual pay increase can be lessened by clearly explaining the methods by which pay raises were determined and allocated.

Research has shown that a host of outcomes are associated with employee perceptions of organizational justice. For example, procedural justice has a positive association with organizational commitment. It has also been found to be negatively related to stress in the

workplace such that high levels of justice lead to lower levels of stress. We would add negative gossip to this list of outcomes. We argue that low levels of organizational justice prompt the generation and dissemination of negative gossip in the workplace. There is a body of anecdotal and empirical evidence to support this assertion. Quite simply, people often talk negatively about others who treated them poorly or unfairly. The gossip spread by Yuki Ogasawara's office ladies in Japan, as discussed above, is a prime example. The office ladies in her study were spreading negative gossip about the men who treated them unfairly. In this case we see negative gossip being used as a means to exact revenge upon individuals who are not respectful of others in their interpersonal dealings.

Promoting organizational justice can therefore be an effective way to prevent the negative gossip that plagues many organizations. The best way to enact procedural justice in an organization is by allowing employees to have a say in decisions, a concept also covered under the term *employee voice*. The benefits of this have long been known by managers who practice participative decision making. Even if the ultimate decision is counter to the desires of an employee, he or she will feel that the decision making procedure was fairer if his or her input was honestly considered. Although this process is more time consuming than making unilateral decisions, it is especially useful when employee buy-in is crucial. There are a number of HRM practices that can be instituted to provide employees with more voice such as: formal dispute resolution and grievance procedures, self-managed work teams, quality circles, employee suggestion mechanisms, attitude surveys, joint consultative committees, and work councils. It should be emphasized, however, that these practices will only promote justice perceptions if employees believe that their input is being carefully weighed by management during the decision

making process. These practices can easily backfire and lead to even lower justice perceptions if employees come to believe that their feedback is being dismissed.

Provide mechanisms for coping with stress or dealing with boredom. Although there are a number of definitions and measures of stress, it is a common workplace phenomenon. It is often thought of as the experience generated when the demands of a situation are greater than the personal, material, or social resources that can be harnessed to deal with—or prepare for—the situation’s occurrence. Importantly, interpersonal relationships are often cited as a primary cause of stress at work. Stress causing relationships can be between an employee and his or her manager, subordinates, peers, or external stakeholders. We know from the work on gossip among nurses done by Waddington and Fletcher that stress prompts gossip. As discussed above, gossiping with coworkers can be a way to “vent,” or release pent-up stress. Gossiping with a coworker, however, about how angry their boss or subordinates make them is not a particularly constructive way for employees to deal with stress. This type of gossip can consume significant amounts of time from the work day of the gossipers as well as the gossip receiver. Moreover, this type of gossip could have negative ramifications if it were to be widely circulated. The ideal solution to this problem would be to eliminate the root cause of the employee’s stress. Sometimes, however, this type of action is either not feasible or not practical. Stress is an unavoidable occurrence in the work lives of many. The next best approach for addressing the problem of stress is to develop effective strategies for coping with it. We argue that helping employees constructively cope with stress at work will minimize their need to release their stress in more harmful ways, like through negative gossip.

Tabea Reuter and Ralf Schwarzer suggest a number of ways that stress can be dealt with. There are a number of things that can be done at the organizational level to help employees

combat stress. First, implementing flexible work schedules can help ameliorate stress by giving employees more control over their time. Flexible work schedules are especially beneficial for relieving the stress caused by competing work and non-work demands. Second, career development is a practice that can be implemented to help employees cope with stress. Career development initiatives provide employees with guidelines for achieving various career outcomes. Career paths are made transparent and employees are informed of the skills and talents that must be cultivated for various positions. This has the effect of not only motivating employees to set challenging goals, it also helps to reduce stress by helping them to effectively prepare for such challenges. Third, role analysis can reduce stress by making an employee's role in the organization more clear and transparent. Conflict and interpersonal tension often arise among co-workers because roles and responsibilities are vague and ambiguous. Role analysis, which is aimed at uncovering and addressing these ambiguities, can help to relieve the role strain and role stress that often results from confusion over the scope and responsibilities of a given role. Finally, goal setting can be an effective way to minimize the stress that might come about when employees don't understand the performance expectations for their roles. Goal setting entails both an employee and his or her manager agreeing to the goals that an employee will strive to achieve. In addition, timeframes regarding when the goals will be accomplished and the criteria by which the goals will be evaluated should also be agreed upon.

Improving the job design of positions can be an effective way to reduce potential causes of boredom. To do this, one must address five crucial job characteristics that have been shown to lead to higher employee motivation and satisfaction. The first characteristic to consider is variety. The goal is for the position to require a range of skills from a worker. Furthermore, these skills should be both challenging and interesting to the individual. Second, the position should

ideally provide an employee with the opportunity to complete an entire job from start to finish. Third, the position should have the potential to significantly impact the lives or work of others, either within the organization or outside of it. Taken together, these three characteristics contribute to an individual's sense of doing work that is meaningful. Fourth, the position should allow for some degree of autonomy. This is likely to cause an employee to feel personally responsible for the outcomes that occur at work. Finally, the position should provide the employee with feedback on their performance. This feedback might be built into the position itself, or it may be provided by external sources such as co-workers or a supervisor. This feedback provides employees with knowledge about the results of their work activities and helps them to appreciate the outcome of their efforts. Properly addressing these five areas is likely to eliminate many of the root causes of gossip, including boredom.

IV. Dealing with the Excessive Gossiper

In some cases the gossip within an office may largely stem from a single person. There are a number of reasons why an individual may engage in excessive gossip at work. Research has not progressed far enough at this time for us to exhaustively discuss the characteristics of the typical "gossipmonger." We can, however, suggest two general strategies for the manager faced with a problematic gossiper.

An inveterate gossiper will often be a highly engaged and intelligent member of the workforce who is disgruntled for some reason. It may be that this individual is engaged in conflict with another co-worker or does not feel that they are being listened to by management. It may also be the case that this person simply doesn't feel challenged in their position and uses gossip as a way to "pass the time." Whatever the case, the manager's first step should be to

directly confront the individual in a private setting. Instead of being overly disciplinary, the manager should treat this meeting as an information gathering session. The goal is for the manager to alert the employee to the issue and also to figure out why it is happening in a non-threatening manner. Sometimes it is enough for the manager to simply listen to the employee's concerns. In other cases, the manager and employee will want to work together to develop a plan of action to correct the situation. For example, if the root cause of the gossip is interpersonal conflict, then the action plan would likely include mediation between the gossiper and the other party in order to resolve the conflict. Before a manager can help to develop a fix, however, they have to understand what is fueling the gossip for the individual. In the initial meeting, it is important for the manager to criticize the behavior of the individual rather than the individual themselves. The manager should start the meeting by explaining what the problematic behavior is, providing concrete examples of the behavior and explanations as to why it causes a problem for the organization. This should be followed by exploratory questions that are designed to draw information out of the individual. Example exploratory questions include: "why do you think this is happening?" "what can be done to prevent this in the future?" and "tell me more about this." After the manager has gathered enough information to have an understanding of the issue, then he or she can work with the employee on an action plan.

A manager may realize, however, that the root cause of an employee's excessive gossip is beyond the scope of his or her ability to address. This is because another major driver of gossip among individuals is anxiety and/or a persistent psychological disability. As we explained above, excessive stress may drive a person to gossip. It can also be the case that mental conditions such as depression may be driving this behavior. In situations where a manager does not feel qualified to address the root causes of excessive gossip, he or she should refer the employee to an

individual specifically trained for these situations. Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) are benefit programs increasingly offered by employers. EAPs are designed to assist employees with personal problems that might affect their health, well-being, or their work performance. EAPs usually provide counseling and referral services to employees and their dependents. These programs are likely to offer services that will greatly benefit those employees that are being driven to gossip because of chronic anxiety or another psychological condition.

V. Conclusion

None of the recommendations offered above is a silver bullet. Managers should consider the specific issues that are generating negative gossip in their organization before embarking on an endeavor to reduce it. A manager must base his or her actions on the unique situation within their organization. Mitigating negative gossip may be as simple as modifying the behavior of one employee or it can be as involved as a full-scale organizational culture overhaul. It might be that one bad apple is responsible for spreading the lion's share of undesirable gossip in the office. If that is the case, then an intervention focused on that one individual may be sufficient. If, however, the gossip is the result of—for example—management mistrust and a breakdown in formal communication lines, then a much more involved effort will be required.

Gossip can be a diagnostic tool for managers. It is akin to an early warning device that alerts the attentive manager to potential problems such as conflicts within work teams or trust issues between labor and management. In their classic *Corporate Cultures: The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life*, Terrence Deal and Allen Kennedy discuss how important it is for managers to be connected to an organization's informal communication network, something they refer to as the "cultural network." By doing so, managers will learn things they wouldn't otherwise have

learned and they will be in a better position to control the dark side of the network. The informal communication network, or the “grapevine,” is not likely to go away. Instead of ignoring it or trying to stamp it out with brute force, managers should listen to it and learn from it. The type of gossip that is circulating will dictate what managers should do, if anything. Listening to the “grapevine” is therefore the first step managers should take rather than attempting to ban gossip. With a little effort, managers will find that they can not only manage gossip within an organization, they can also benefit from it.

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