

What's the Tea? Misinformation and Comradery

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The modern workplace is very different from what it was just five or six years ago. The continuous growth of digital collaboration and communication tools, the widespread acceptance of remote and hybrid work schedules, and the shift in what workers value most in the workplace have changed the nature of work. One thing that hasn't changed is the tendency of coworkers across different organizations to engage in gossip. Generally speaking, gossip can be viewed as conversation between coworkers that does not pertain directly to their work responsibilities. Quite often, it is about other coworkers, clients, or people within the social circle of the workplace.

Gossip can be a controversial subject, with some convinced that it offers numerous tangible benefits while others view it as a toxic and destructive social practice. As a nonprofit leader, you are likely interested in anything that helps staff happiness and retention. Despite the seemingly innocuous nature of workplace gossip, it can have a dramatic effect on your organizational morale and can even lead to legal issues, depending on how you choose to handle it. Here are some key benefits and risks of workplace gossip:

HOW GOSSIP CAN HELP YOUR ORGANIZATION

Gossip is more prevalent than most realize. Studies show that the average person gossips for about 52 minutes per day. This indicates that gossip, like many social practices, is important to people. It is also notable that gossip in a workplace context is mostly innocuous, focused on light social interactions like discussing a future vacation or weekend plans. However, some experts say this kind of seemingly innocuous communication is critical to many of the things managers desire, like workplace happiness, team building, and trust between coworkers. Because it is unmanaged, social, and mostly unrelated to work, gossip can help your employees reduce stress and feel a personal attachment to their team.

For example, people experience and deal with stress at different levels, and, depending on their individual circumstances, may find that "venting" to trusted coworkers can help them relieve stress and enjoy greater productivity at work. Even for organizations which prioritize mental health support and a good work-life balance, stress can sometimes be brought on by something that doesn't rise to the level which pushes an employee to seek formal resources. In this case, chatting with coworkers about a difficult commute or other source of stress can be an invaluable outlet.

While company mandated team-building exercises and efforts can serve their purpose, they cannot necessarily replace the value of informal person to person and group social interaction. Feeling part of a group can help people stay motivated, as an employee's work becomes about more than just fulfilling their responsibilities. They want to help their teammates thrive as well. Your team could feel more motivated to go above and beyond for people they know and care about, which is difficult to establish without meaningful social interaction. Creating space for casual interaction can help enable this.

THE RISKS OF WORKPLACE GOSSIP

Despite the potential benefits, gossip offers plenty of risks as well. The most obvious is the inverse of many of the benefits discussed above — if gossip is highly focused on the personal lives of coworkers, is demeaning, or part of an unequal power dynamic, this can foster mistrust, anger, and can even be grounds for workplace harassment. The positive effects of gossip are premised on harmonious relations between your team members and a shared standard of professional conduct. However, because people may not always get along or share those standards, informal interaction like gossip can cause disagreements and erode trust.

normally collaborative team members can reduce their ability to fulfill their responsibilities. Moreover, because the origin of the disagreement is unrelated to the business, there's less likelihood of anyone involved disclosing the issue to management in hopes of mediation or a solution. Depending on the severity and nature of the gossip, it can be difficult to fully resolve these situations. Damaged trust can be difficult to heal, and even people who aren't directly involved might start to feel concerned about the culture and safety of their workplace.

It isn't hard to see how this could impact productivity — disagreements between two



Gossip can also serve as a channel for spreading misinformation. If, for example, you announce that your organization has missed a fundraising target, some might take this opportunity to baselessly speculate about the stability of the organization and their job security. Because informal communication isn't fact checked, this kind of speculation can grow and change into something your team believes to be true. This kind of gossip can be highly disruptive to your internal communications efforts, team morale, and even retention. If your staff continually hears rumors of organizational decline, they may check out or begin to look for other work, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The tricky part is, there is no ideal way to totally eliminate the risks of gossip. Stringent restrictions on workplace communication, constant surveillance by management, or other such measures can foster mistrust and decrease workplace happiness. Additionally, there are cases where codes of conduct have been deemed overly restrictive and therefore unlawful. Because the right to discuss workplace conditions is a federally protected right under the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), if you create a code of conduct that infringes on those rights, even unintentionally, that could be grounds for legal action from the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). If you do choose to address gossip and professional conduct in your employee resources or handbook, it could be a good idea to have it reviewed by a lawyer.

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