TOH@UTC Guide to Managing Gossip at Work

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Reducing and effectively managing negative gossip at work is an important strategy for promoting and protecting Total Organizational Health here at UTC (as part of the TOH@UTC initiative). Doing so will help improve employee performance and well-being by improving trust, respect, and dignity among all members of the UTC organization. Making an effort to limit or prevent negative gossip within a department or area of UTC's campus supports a healthier work environment that prioritizes safe spaces, honest communication, and beneficial interpersonal relationships. Acknowledging the harm caused by negative gossip enables managers and supervisors to communicate to their staff that their issues are valid and treated with the seriousness that they deserve. Additionally, addressing negative gossip helps to facilitate collaboration among staff members, which allows for increased creativity, engagement, and overall employee performance.

What is Gossip and Why Do People Participate in It?

As discussed in a corresponding TOH@UTC blog post that you can access via this link: https://blog.utc.edu/toh/2024/09/10/managing-gossip-at-work/, gossip is a sharing or exchange of negative or positive information about a person that is presented in an evaluative way when that person or group of persons is not present or involved in the conversation (e.g., Wax et al., 2022). Not all gossip at work is negative or destructive in its intention or form. It is important for supervisors to recognize that some gossip can actually benefit a workgroup (e.g., Grosser et al., 2012).

Employees may share gossip for a variety of reasons. First, gossip can resolve the employee's need for information. Because gossip can often provide information faster and more easily than a legitimate source, employees may participate in gossip to stay up to date with the happenings of their organization. Second, gossip can give the employee a degree of influence over their coworkers. As gossip can give participants the power to determine who gets to be included socially, some may perpetuate gossip for the social advantage of being perceived as a person connected and "in the know." A similar reason includes the idea that gossip can be so embedded into the culture of an organization that employees spread rumors to feel included and avoid conflict with their coworkers. Finally, gossiping can serve as an emotional outlet for employees. Staff members experiencing extreme levels of stress or boredom may take part in gossip in an attempt to regulate their emotions or achieve an emotional release.

Examples of Effectively Managing Workplace Gossip

Because workplace gossip often looks different across organizations, it cannot always be navigated in the same way. Here are a few examples of how different supervisors were able to effectively respond to and manage gossip in their workgroups:

- **Preventing Rumors from Spiraling:** As COO of a major company, Katrina made the decision to terminate her entire sales team over the course of a year. Because she knew that such a drastic change would cause the rest of her employees to spiral and spread gossip, Katrina regularly checked in with her workforce before, after, and during the process. She asked her employees how they were feeling about her decision, what she could have done better to ease the transition, and if there was anything about the situation that they wanted to know. In doing so, Katrina was able to prevent rumors from getting out of hand and stop negative gossip from occurring (Bassuk & Lew, 2016).
- **The Importance of Transparency**: Joe, the CEO of a plastic manufacturing company, wanted to purchase another firm. Since he knew this decision would cause gossip to abound, before he made the purchase, Joe assembled his team and explained the company's financial status in detail. Then, he explained his plan for purchasing another firm, which included a thorough timeline of the process. By remaining transparent with his team and treating them as equals, Joe successfully averted a situation that could have caused destructive gossip to flourish (Bassuk & Lew, 2016).
- **A Culture of Open Communication:** Ken manages a team for a mid-sized tech company. He regularly holds meetings with his employees to discuss issues and concerns that they are experiencing. In one meeting, one of his employees asked him if he was aware that another person on the team who was not present often says rude things to his coworkers. Ken thanked this employee for speaking up, communicated to his team that he did not know about this problem, and reassured them that he cared and wanted more information. Because Ken cultivated a culture of honesty in the workplace and validated his employees' concerns, he was able to address gossip in the open and avoid its negative effect (Grenny, 2015).

Strategies for Managing Gossip

As a basic social activity, gossip can never be completely eliminated from an organization, nor does the positive kind of gossip always need to be constrained. However, negative gossip can quickly spiral out of control and turn destructive. For this reason, it is crucial that supervisors and employees collectively monitor communication within their workgroups. It is possible to intervene if needed to reduce damaging gossip while allowing constructive gossip to continue. Here are some practical suggestions for supervisors to consider if there is a need to manage gossip within their workgroups:

1. **Increase Formal Communication:** The most effective way for supervisors to stop gossip from occurring in the first place is to communicate consistently, clearly, and genuinely with their employees. Openly addressing concerns and questions in this manner helps to prevent false rumors from spreading, which may be especially important for maintaining morale during times of great organizational change. This may involve paying attention to how your employees feel about communication within their workgroup. This type of "checking in" behavior can promote trust and helps your employees feel valued and listened to.

2. **Encourage a Culture of Civility:** Supervisors are responsible for embodying the values and behaviors that they want their employees to adopt. Thus, it is imperative that their actions remain empathetic but factual. In other words, supervisors should refuse to engage in gossip and the sharing of rumors, and focus instead on discussing facts in a manner that treats everyone with civility and respect. Doing this can help to improve communication with and among employees in a workgroup. Supervisors can inspire their employees to cultivate workplace fellowship and friendships by sponsoring events and outings, implementing ice breakers at the beginning of meetings, and getting to know their employees on an individual basis. If interpersonal problems among your employees continue to persist, supervisors can also implement team training programs designed to build interpersonal skills and cooperation.

3. **Promote Fair Treatment and Transparency:** Simply put, employees are more likely to spread gossip about leaders and others when they feel they have been treated poorly or unfairly, especially regarding how important workplace decisions have been made. Thus, supervisors should advocate for justice in the workplace and ensure that their employees feel heard and validated. The key is to provide employees with a voice whenever possible, which may include instigating a formal dispute resolution and grievance process, regularly gathering employee suggestions and inputs, and trusting them with control over their jobs. Additionally, ensure that all important decisions are well-informed and made through a process that can be communicated clearly to employees who are impacted by those decisions.

4. **Assist Employees with Managing Stress and Boredom:** When employees experience work demands that exceed their resources to meet those demands, they will experience stress. Sometimes it is difficult to cope with work-related stress and engaging in gossip is often a strategy that provides temporary relief. Unfortunately, gossip does not address the underlying factors that cause stress. Keeping this in mind, supervisors may be able to assist employees who are experiencing stress and avoid gossip by helping employees gain access to resources they may need to respond to the actual cause of the stress (e.g., flexibility in work schedule, new career development opportunities, improved task clarity). If an employee appears to be gossiping out of boredom, consider providing them with more variety in their day-to-day tasks. Help them to realize the positive impact of

their position, give them more feedback, and offer them more autonomy and control. Refer to [TOH@UTC resources for job crafting](#) for help along these lines. Taking such measures should help to prevent employees from gossiping to cope with any extreme emotion they may be facing.

5. **Deal with Problematic Individuals on a Case-by-Case Basis:** Occasionally a supervisor may find that gossip within a workgroup originates from the same individual(s). In these situations, it is important for supervisors to address these individuals confidentially and in a non-threatening manner to learn why the gossip is occurring and to discuss the impacts or consequences of that gossip within the workgroup. Depending on the specific situation, these employees may benefit from additional training or intervention efforts that build coping and interpersonal skills. In addition, if necessary, a supervisor can encourage distressed employees to take advantage of [UTC's Employee Assistance Program (EAP)](#) or the [UTC Ombuds](#) service, which can help with issues such as workplace conflicts, anxiety and depression, and work/life balance.

6. **Gossip as an Indicator:** Finally, since negative gossip does tend to co-occur with other negative workplace outcomes such as impaired well-being and interpersonal mistreatment, supervisors should note that gossip in the workplace may be an indicator of other underlying issues among their employees. Supervisors must take steps to identify and address other problems that may be causing or exacerbating negative gossip within their workgroup.

Resources Supporting this Guide and Recommended Reading

This guide and this corresponding TOH@UTC blog post were developed using information from the following resources. For more information or help with managing gossip within your work area or department, please refer to any of these resources or contact the TOH@UTC team at toh@utc.edu.

Basuk, A. & Lew, C. (2016, November 11). The antidote to office gossip. *Harvard Business Review.* **https://hbr.org/2016/11/the-antidote-to-office-gossip.**

This article highlights some reasons why employees may gossip and stresses the importance of continually surveying employees to prevent rumors from escalating. For an example of a supervisor handling gossip in the midst of great organizational change, this article may be a helpful resource.

Grenny, J. (2015, January 9). Stop enabling gossip on your team. *Harvard Business Review.* **https://hbr.org/2015/01/stop-enabling-gossip-on-your-team.**

These authors explore the mechanics of healthy communication and include some examples of supervisors addressing gossip in the workplace.

Grosser, T.J., Lopez-Kidwell, V., Labianca, G., & Ellwardt, L. (2012). Hearing it through the grapevine. *Organizational Dynamics, 41,* **52-61. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orgdyn.2011.12.007.**

As a review of the existing literature on workplace gossip, this article may be helpful for UTC employees looking for more details on what gossip is and how it functions at work. Utilize this resource to further understand the positive and negative effects of workplace gossip.

Hailey, L. (2023, December 15). *Workplace gossip: 6 ways to handle it without the drama.* **ScienceofPeople.com. https://www.scienceofpeople.com/workplace-gossip/.**

This article is especially helpful for differentiating between positive and negative gossip. It also provides some real-life examples of how to curtail gossip in the workplace.

Lipman, V. (2016, October 19). How to steer clear of office gossip. *Harvard Business Review.* **https://hbr.org/2016/10/how-to-steer-clear-of-office-gossip.**

After acknowledging the supervisor's role in setting an example for their employees, this resource discusses actions a supervisor should take to discourage their workforce from excessively gossiping.

Wax, A. Rodriguez, W.A., Ascencio, R. (2022). Spilling tea at the watercooler: A meta-analysis of the literature on workplace gossip. *Organizational Psychology Review, 12*(4), 453-506. https://doi.org/10.1177/20413866221112383.

Another review of the current research on workplace gossip, this article provides an update on what is known about gossip and its relationship with pertinent workplace outcomes.

Wilkström, E., & Liff, R. (2021). Rumors and gossip demand continuous action by managers in daily working life. *Culture and Organization, 27*(6), 456-475. https://doi.org/10.1080/14759551.2021.1884681.

These authors emphasize the supervisor's role in reducing gossip and provide suggestions for curtailing it in the workplace. They determine that without management intervention, gossip is a continual cycle with potentially destructive implications.