# What to Do About Gossip in the Workplace




How does the gossiping behavior impact the workplace, as well as your ability, and that of your employees, to get the job done?

The answer to this question brings about a transition in thinking as supervisors realize just how much gossip impacts the workplace. They typically respond as follows:

- Gossip results in missed communications that often result in deadlines not being met or work not getting done properly.
- Gossip results in misunderstandings that quickly lead to conflict and sometimes to such strained relationships that some employees can no longer work together effectively.
- Gossip breaks down the trust level within the group, which results in employees second guessing each other and, ultimately, running to the supervisor to clarify the directions or instructions or to settle the differences that will arise.
- Gossip is the death of teamwork as the group breaks up into small “cliques” and employees start refusing to work with others.
- Gossip results in the supervisor spending an enormous amount of time trying to figure out who said what to whom so the workgroup can accomplish the task(s) assigned. Or, worse yet, the supervisor struggles to explain to the manager that the on-going conflicts and communications problems within the workgroup are the reason work doesn’t get done only to hear the manager comment, “Why can’t you manage your team better?”
- Gossip impacts productivity as staff uses the employer’s time to engage in the gossiping.
- Gossip sometimes is so severe that the good employees, those that tend to not engage in the gossip, leave the workgroup.
- Gossip is so overwhelming that supervisors find themselves going home at night so exhausted that they wonder if being a supervisor is worth the emotional toll it takes.

So, what can be done? Because gossip does impact the workplace so strongly, employers are well within their rights to try and stop the behavior. Gossip is a serious workplace problem that can be managed. To clarify, manage doesn’t mean the gossip will entirely disappear, but that it can be contained to the point that the impact it has on the workplace is diminished. Before controlling gossip, however, we must first define what is meant by gossip and consider why

an individual engages in “gossiping.”

## GOSSIP DEFINED

Gossip is the primary mechanism for communicating and spreading negativity. For this reason, managers and supervisors need to take active steps to control gossip. We have found the definition that follows to be very helpful in nailing down what gossip means.

Gossip is defined as a form of communication that an individual(s) participates in for the purpose of discussion, or passing onto to others, “hearsay” information. Gossip is a very destructive, hurtful, and divisive form of communication that often permeates the workplace. There are employees who take great pleasure and spend a great deal of time gossiping and spreading rumors. Known as rumormongers, these individuals often participate in gossiping with other employees because they believe it increases their importance in the workplace and builds their self-esteem. Some employees may view this individual as being the “in-the-know” person in the work group.

## STOPPING GOSSIP

Now that we have defined gossip, what should an employer do about it? Although we may not be able to stomp out gossip completely, we can control and contain it. Here are some tips for controlling and containing workplace gossipers:

- Communicate regularly and consistently with employees about what’s going on in the workplace. Regular communications minimize the influence the gossiping employee has over others, because everyone is “in-the-know.” If employees don’t have good information from the supervisor about what is going on, they will make it up in the form of speculation and “gossip.” Make communicating with employees an assignment on each day’s calendar even if it is only for five minutes. The added attention and communications will work wonders in stopping the gossip.
- Incorporate into your workplace expectations a segment that speaks to employees not engaging in the spreading of gossip and rumors. For example: “Do not participate in spreading gossip and rumors, and do not tolerate it from others. Rumor and gossip sabotages the team’s ability to work together effectively. It is disrespectful, nonproductive, and a selfishly motivated act that impedes employees from performing their jobs. If you hear about an issue that pertains directly to you, verify the accuracy of the information by asking the supervisor or the coworker involved, rather than simply passing on the information.”
- Tell the rumormonger/gossiping employee that you are aware of his/her behavior. Describe how his/her behavior results in others not trusting him/her because as a general rule no one wants to become the next subject of the “gossip.” For some, this single statement will bring about a realization that will result in immediate change. Often the employee doesn’t understand, fully, why he/she engages in the behavior and the impact that his/her behavior has on his/her own credibility within the team. Finally, the supervisor should describe the impact the employee’s behavior has on the workplace and that his/her continued participation in the spreading of rumor and gossip is a violation of the workplace expectations.
- A workplace expectation about gossiping gives permission to coworkers to

hold each other mutually accountable for having a “gossip free” workplace. Have a discussion with employees, similar to the one at the beginning of this article, about the impact gossip has on the workplace. Most employees will come to the same conclusion that the supervisors did; namely, that gossip is problematic for our workplace and it can be controlled. This realization sets the tone for individual employees to commit to, and to hold each other accountable to, not engaging in gossip because they understand the negative impact the behavior has on them as individuals and on the work group as a whole.

- Incorporate the impact the employee’s behavior has had on the workplace in his/her performance evaluations, i.e., teamwork, working with minimal supervision, following procedures, cooperating with others.