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Gossip Can Compromise Workplace Productivity

“Even doubtful accusations leave a stain behind them.” ~ Thomas Fuller

Humans are social by nature, so will tend to congregate to share experiences and stories that have common interest. While this behavior can have positive results in regard to bonding and team building, there is a dark side that can be very damaging to productivity and morale.

Gossip represents a sustained and often malicious form of communication that focuses on the sharing of personal or sensationalized information—usually negative and unsubstantiated—meant to generate a strong response from others. So why would someone want to spread rumors and other negative information within the workplace.

- People who gossip often seek to control their work environments—gaining power and status—when they cannot do so through more positive means, such as leadership or expertise.
- Gossip can be a passive aggressive response by people who bear a grudge toward others for actual or perceived wrongdoings. It may not feel safe to discuss these issues openly, so gossip is an indirect way to compromise the position and success of others within the group.
- Boredom often generates negative behaviors in people. Employees who are busy with work requirements will tend to gossip less than those with idle time.

Managers can play an essential role in minimizing gossip, starting with the realization that gossip is a major reason for workplace conflict and reduced productivity. In fact, excessive workplace gossip is an important sign of a dysfunctional work environment, and can also be a liability to employers for civil rights or harassment reasons.

“Rumor travels faster, but it don't stay put as long as truth.” ~ Will Rogers

Managers can and should feel empowered to control gossip in the workplace. Here are a few ways to reduce gossip that will have the added benefit of generating stronger, healthier environments.

- Establish a clear understanding among employees that excessive gossip will not be tolerated, and create consequences that are fair, but significant and enforceable.
- Gossip is often generated during rapidly changing environments, and where communication between managers and staff is weak. Minimize the development of rumors by keeping staff well informed of evolving issues, while directly addressing common concerns.
- People who listen to and tolerate gossip are also part of the problem, often unintentionally. Gossipers feed off of the reactions they receive from others. Therefore, encourage employees to be proactive in dissuading gossipers by staying focused on work and refusing to participate.
- Lead by example. Managers and supervisors who gossip themselves will not have much credibility with staff persons who are gossiping.

“There is so much good in the worst of us, and so much bad in the best of us, that it hardly behooves any of us, to talk about the rest of us.” ~ Edward Wallis Hoch