Welcome to Two-Minute Tuesday. I’m Meagan Decker. Our topic today is poison in the workplace.

People tend to talk. They chit-chat at the water cooler about current events, the latest TV shows, and so on. Inevitably, they start talking about folks they work with.

By nature, we’re social beings and we like to … well … socialize. These types of interactions help us form relationships. But when is it just harmless chit chat versus harmful gossip? How do you tell the difference?

There is a very big difference, and it is an important one, because gossip and rumors can be destructive and hurt morale and productivity. Left unchecked, gossip can poison the environment.

Gossip has a dark side. While idle chit chat and other light conversation can be value neutral, gossip is often negative, inflammatory and embarrassing to the person being spoken of.

Also, gossip can increase conflict. These conflicts can result in strained relationships where employees are refusing to work with each other and forming alliances as if they were contestants on Survivor. The bottom line is, gossip breaks down the trust level within the group. It can be the death of teamwork. So while it may seem as though idle gossip is harmless on the surface — it is not. Besides wasting time and taking the focus off the real work, it is actually hurting our foundation by putting cracks in it and destroying trust.

When communication and workplace relationships become unhealthy, the people in the work environment become unhealthy. Even if some are not involved in the gossip they are impacted by the tension in the environment.

So again, what is the difference between harmless conversation and hurtful gossip? It has a lot to do with intent. Technically, any sharing of trivial or unsubstantiated information can be considered gossip. But think about what you’re sharing and why.

For example, if it were rumored that a co-worker was getting a promotion and you talk about it with another co-worker, is that gossip? If the discussion is hurtful or damaging or negative, then yes, it is gossip. But if it’s value neutral, then it’s not.

Before you open your mouth to speak, ask yourself these questions, Is it true? Is it kind? And Is it helpful?
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And would I say this to their face? Both individuals and organizations have a responsibility to ensure that gossip in the workplace does not have a detrimental impact on employees or the organization.

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What can YOU do? If you don’t listen, the gossip has nowhere to go. It is really hard to tell a story to someone who is not interested. Walk away and don’t participate. Be direct. Tell the gossiper that their behavior makes you uncomfortable. Don’t be afraid to go to your supervisor.

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This doesn’t mean you can’t talk to one another but be aware of the impact words have. Remember, the things you say about others say just as much about yourself.

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