

Let me start by saying that I am not against sharing personal news and accessing support from colleagues at school. In fact, such informal conversations are often typical of high-performing teams. But friendly work banter is quite different from gossip, which can be quite destructive to workplace relationships, morale and productivity.

There are two main types of gossip:

*Hurtful personal gossip:* This is where sensitive, personal information is being repeated without that person's consent or what is being said about a person is totally untrue and hurtful. I recall one unhappy team member spreading false rumours about her manager who she said was having an affair. If you wouldn't feel good repeating what is being said within that person's hearing, don't say it.

Yes, most of us need to vent from time to time about one of our colleagues. But set a time limit on it, move forward or work it out. Also place a limit on who you confide in. A close, supportive colleague who can keep your confidence might be acceptable but complaining to the entire staff is certainly not. It is also important not to take your grievances on-line.

*Grapevine gossip:* A typical example of grapevine gossip is about planned changes. Unfortunately, such gossip, whether true or not, can spread like wildfire as it is fueled by fear. If rumours are not addressed quickly, they can lead to reduced morale, unnecessary staff turnover and low levels of trust in the leadership team.

Of course, just the opposite is true. Grapevine gossip is discouraged when there are positive, supportive relationships and a high level of trust in the leadership, who are transparent about what they know or are allowed to say.

There are also actions that can be taken at a workplace level to discourage gossip.

*Developing workplace policies:* Some workplaces develop a Statement of Shared Values and Behaviours or a Team Charter that lists behaviours that are above or below the line of what is desired. Developing such policies is the easy part. The hard part is keeping these documents alive. Some workplaces do so by catching people doing the right thing, regular written and verbal reminders, or setting up a staff well-being sub-committee to monitor and build on progress.

*Leaders setting the example:* Of course, the behaviour from those in leadership roles sets the standard. It is not good if someone from the leadership team is repeating matters that should be kept in confidence. This sets a very low benchmark for acceptable behaviour.

Long-serving staff are also in leadership roles as people look to them for their example. Their willingness to discourage or not engage in destructive or hurtful gossip is the example they need to set for their colleagues.

*Holding people accountable:* Certainly, there is some gossip you can ignore, particularly if it is short-term. However, if it continues or is hurtful or unsettling, it is important to take action, particularly if they are in a leadership role or are a long-serving member of staff. You can speak to staff generally, explaining the effects it can have on people. You can also speak to people individually. Remember to allow people to save face as, most times, such behaviour is not meant to be disrespectful. But it is about perceptions. We all need to think about how our words can be perceived by others.

Ultimately, we all have a responsibility for contributing positively to workplace morale and strong team relationships. We need to use our words to support and build each other up rather than to make ourselves feel good at the expense of others or create uncertainty.

Think twice before you speak, because your words and influence will plant the seeds of either success or failure in the mind of another.

Napoleon Hill

## Key points

Friendly work banter is different to gossip.

If you wouldn't feel good repeating what is being said within that person's hearing, don't say it.

Leaders and long serving staff members must set the example.

Hold people accountable by taking action where gossip is hurtful or unsettling but do it privately to allow people to save face



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