

## **Managing Gossip in Organizations -A conceptual Framework**

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### **Abstract**

Gossip is a phenomenon that has been labeled by many as bad, and yet relatively little is understood about its influence to employees. There are positive effects of Gossiping at work; meanwhile there are also negative aspects of this behavior in most organizations. Gossip in organizations may manage using different strategies and philosophies.

**Key Work:** Managing Gossip, Gossip, behavior, organizations behavior, employees behavior

### **Résumé**

Le bavardage est un phénomène qui est qualifié par beaucoup de chercheurs comme étant mauvais, et il peut même affecter l'environnement du travail. Toutefois de l'avis de certains le bavardage interrompant le travail monotone apparaît comme nécessaire à l'équilibre psychique. Les entreprises peuvent néanmoins préconiser certaines mesures pour limiter les effets du bavardage dans les bureaux.

**Mots Cles:** Gérer les potins, Potins, comportement, comportement des organisations, le comportement des employés

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## **Introduction:**

Gossip is a common phenomenon in the workplace. Every organization faces gossip problems. This is a very common phenomenon due to human nature.

Gossip, or talking about others in their absence, is one of the most pervasive human activities. Research has shown that people devote approximately 65% of their speaking time to social topics, with only marginal variation among age, gender, and cultures, and that up to two thirds of all conversations refer to third parties (Waddington and Michelson, 2007). Europe suggests that over 90% of the workforce engages in at least some gossip activity on the job (Ferrari, 2015). Consequently, over the last decade or two, organization scholars have shown increasing interest in the antecedents of workplace gossip, emphasizing the important role that gossip plays in the process of norm enforcement and cooperation (Waddington and Michelson, 2007).

It was only due to religious writings through the years that the concept acquired a somewhat negative connotation. Readings from the Christian Bible such as the following depict the negative connotation and evil tongue associated with gossip: 'The godless man uses his mouth to destroy his neighbor but the virtuous use their wisdom to save themselves. Gossip reveals secrets, but the trustworthy man keeps a secret.' (Proverbs 11: 9, 13)

The Koran also includes comments on gossip: 'God has heard the speech of her who wrangled with you about her husband, and complained to God; and God hears your gossip; verily, God both hears and sees.' (Koran Sura 58: The Pleader of Madina)

Similarly, gossip in Hebrew is called 'Lashon Harah', which means 'the evil tongue', and the Torah outlaws gossip, true or false, about others or even oneself (Hecht, n.d). Below is a quote from the Torah in this regard: 'Thou shalt not go up and down as a tale-bearer among thy people.' (Leviticus 19:16) (Gouveia, et.al, 2005).

## **What is Gossip at work place?**

Everyone knows what gossip is, but it is not so easy to define it. Consistent with a widespread approach in literature, gossip could be defined through several elements.

Workplace gossip is defined as informal and evaluative talk in an organization about another member of that organization who is not present. It takes place in a setting of three actors: the sender, receiver, and object of gossip (i.e., the absent third party). It is an idle talk, which is not always true, about other people and their affairs. (Gouveia, et.al, 2005)

Gossip's general definition normally refers to misinformation of stories being communicated on a public scope whereby people use this process to share facts and personal opinions. However, gossip has a reputation for not being accurate with modifications and additional information of initial subject matter.

Gossips are information conveyed to other people at the time of interpersonal contact. Interest and thirst for such information is widely spread. So it is not surprising that gossips are

being embedded as characteristic features of all cultures and are spread in all layers of various societies. (Abdul Manaf, et.al, 2013)

### **Characteristics of gossip activity:**

1-While workplace gossip hardly seems to depend on personal characteristics, its antecedents can be found in the social relationships between organizational members organization

The emergence of gossip is assumed to depend on the interpersonal trust relationships between those three actors (Ellwardt, 2011)

2-Gossip has a reputation for not being accurate with modifications and additional information of initial subject matter.

Gossips are information conveyed to other people at the time of interpersonal contact. Interest and thirst for such information is widely spread. So it is not surprising that gossips are being embedded as characteristic features of all cultures and are spread in all layers of various societies. This phenomenon is distinguished by its universality because it extends to all social groups and professions and is generally caused by the cultural mentality.

3- Different social groups and separate professions vary in receptivity of gossips but the influence of them is felt by everyone (Abdul Manaf et, al, 2013)

4- All gossip is based on a lie: Actually, a lot of what is shared in a juicy gossip session is based on fact and truth. The problem, however, isn't the content of what is shared, but who it is shared with and the motivation behind spreading the personal information.

### **Gossip Statistics:**

Scholars indicate that 14% workplace coffee break chat is actually gossip and about 66% of general conversation between employees is related to social topics concerning talk about other people. (Kuo, et, al, 2005)

It was reported by a Social Issues Research Center that gossip accounts for 55% of men's conversation time and 67% of women's, a much smaller gap between the two sexes than usually thought.

A recent survey suggested that: 15% of employees occasionally engaged in gossip,21% of employees regularly participated in gossip,86% of gossip was related to corporate challenges, a gossip session lasts 15 minutes on average, and the total time wasted with gossip at work per year is 65 hours. (Gallagher, 2015)

### **Why gossip at workplace?**

From an organizational perspective, gossip is generally deemed to have negative consequences. It has been argued that the grapevine develops as a result of a poor formal communication network within an organization. Those in authority who object to the formation of the grapevine tend to rigorously disclaim all responsibility for its creation instead blaming the grapevine participants. In addition, poor communication strategies are suggested to be responsible for excessive uncertainty and pervasive rumors. Conversely, the grapevine can

improve organization effectiveness and help employees make sense of limited information serving as an early warning signal for organizational change.

Research shows that men may be neurologically wired to deal with conflict differently than women. Confrontations between men are typically direct, aggressive, and aimed at determining who has the greater status. Anthropologist Marjorie Harness Goodwin notes that once young men have completed conflict, they quickly move on. Women, on the other hand, tend to avoid direct confrontation, instead choosing to seek support from other women. Gossip is avoidant behavior. Janice expresses her resentment toward Elena indirectly, without confronting her face-to-face. She gossips, perhaps because she does not know how to express her views in person.

According to Bruno and Copeland (1999), 80 percent of early childhood leaders are conflict avoidant; we fear direct confrontation. Many of us prefer to believe that problems eventually go away. Center directors and other supervisors hope staff will magically get the message to improve performance by observing how supervisors do things. (Bruno, 2007)

### **Gossip at work place: Positive or negative behavior?**

The term is frequently used with negative connotations, referring to spreading of malicious information, unreliably sourced and unchecked anecdotes and misinformation. The other negative views of gossip are its being trivial, invasive, and commonly harmful. (Crnkovic and Anokhina, 2008)

### **Negative Aspects:**

Within the organizational and management literature, gossip is seen as a potentially important, but under researched area of inquiry. Thus far, gossip has predominantly featured as coincidental to the mainstream disciplines and domains. It surfaces as a by-product of inquiry into, for example, organizational culture, storytelling and conflict, rather than as a topic worthy of theoretical and research interest in its own right. Gossip can also be found in the 'popular management' literature, where it is treated as a 'problem'; it is detrimental to work, is not to be encouraged or condoned, and is something to be 'managed'. To some extent, this popular management perspective exemplifies a view of gossip associated with negative, pejorative and trivial assumptions, something seen as gendered or more specifically 'women's talk', inauthentic discourse, and a phenomenon to be discouraged or banned. Whilst acknowledging this gendered, historical and philosophical context, in the absence of empirical evidence, such unsupported claims regarding the management of gossip in organizations are open to challenge. (Waddington and Michelson, 2007)

Gossip can have many adverse side effects on an organization. Gossip can give rise to organizational conflicts and it can reduce employee's motivation. The sense of trust within the group can be reduced due to these strained relations. In this case, managers have to spend a large portion of their time to manage the consequences of gossip and to develop a perception that "they cannot manage their teams appropriately". Therefore, it is essential that the presence of informal communication can be recognized and necessary measures can be taken so that its potential negative impact on organizational order and individuals can be eliminated. It is possible to regard gossip with a negative characteristic as bullying, particularly if there are lies

involved. Most of the bullying encountered in adult population takes place as relational aggression, and it takes the shape of rumor, gossip and hearsay. This ruins the reputation of individuals and also the interpersonal climate it brings about will have distrust and ill will, which is not a suitable condition to work and establish social ties. (Bulduk et,al, 2016)

A challenge facing nearly every organization in a crisis is the circulation of gossips in which, unaddressed, can cause significant reputational harm and sometimes even more harm than the crisis. Gossips are particularly challenging because it is hard to figure out when a gossip started, how it is building momentum and when it might end. Once started, gossips can spread among employees, customers, suppliers, lenders, investors and regulators. Gossips can feed other gossips, and when they hit the media, they are formalized and seen as accurate rendering of reality. (Abdul Manaf, et, al, 2013)

When employees start to feel comfortable with each other, they begin to share personal information about themselves. Employees can sometimes mishandle the information by sharing it with other coworkers. Once gossip starts to pervade the workplace, productivity and teamwork suffer.

Here are just a few examples of the cost of workplace gossip:

- Lost productivity and wasted time.
- Morale and trust are eroded.
- Increased anxiety among employees as rumors circulates without any clear information as to what is fact and what isn't.
- Divisiveness tends to grow among employees as people may "take sides".
- Feelings and reputations are hurt, sometimes causing severe damage.
- The "gossipers" may jeopardize chances for their own advancement because they are perceived as unprofessional.
- Good employees may leave the company due to the unhealthy work atmosphere

### **Positive Aspects:**

Rather than viewing gossip as a problem and/or something that is trivial and unworthy of investigation in organizational research, we argue that gossip is a potentially rich source of informal narrative knowledge and management information that can illuminate understanding about a range of organizational issues.

It allows employees to understand and predict their bosses' behaviour; it can be used to ruin competitors' reputations; and the casual context encourages the development of social networks between workmates

Gossip can play an important role in sustaining durable cooperation in human groups in general and within organizations in particular (Waddington and Michelson, 2007)

Positive gossip involves functions such as staff getting social satisfaction (e.g. personal friendships, informal groups, etc.) and often completion of unknown or missing information. In addition, in comparison with formal channels, it informal communication ensures more rapid dissemination of information. It also helps managers find out about employees' various

complaints and suggestions about the organization and its environment in a short time, take the necessary measures, and prevent organizational losses. It was reported that positive effects of gossip is seen higher at an individual level than a group level. (Bulduk et, al, 2016)

Some view gossip as a positive effect, as such giving individuals the ability to form social bonds between colleagues. However, some researchers disagree with the notion, as to him gossip causes negative “misbehaviour” effect on productivity and moral that consequently impacts the bottom line. It goes without saying, that the influence of a gossip itself diverse in nature. It can help some individuals, a group, an organization or an institution to achieve a fixed aim in a very positive manner, but on the other hand can also cause harm. From this perspective, it is likely to view gossip as means of fighting for achieving one’s interests because various concerned groups, organizations, political parties and other institutions are inclined to make use of it.

Hence, it is likely to authenticate that a gossip has got an influential (tool) purpose fulfilling some social functions.

Sometimes it becomes an effective means of control in social groups and social behaviour of their members, and also the support of a group’s identity and stability.

(Abdul Manaf,et,al, 2013)

-Potential benefits for gossipers are not only at group level; the social bonding function of gossip may mean that gossipers feel closer to their listeners. Indeed, Even when talking negatively about others, if a listener shares a speaker’s emotional reactions to the person being talked about, the listener feels closer to the speaker when those reactions are shared. Often the sole purpose of gossip is to pass the time and alleviate boredom; an activity which may also endear the gossip to their listeners. (Cole and Scrivener, 2013)

### **How to manage Gossip in Organizations?**

Gossip is rampant in most workplaces. Sometimes, it seems as if people have nothing better to do than gossip about each other. They talk about the company, their coworkers, and their managers. They frequently take a partial truth and turn it into a whole speculative truth.

They speculate about the company's future, whether coworkers will get fired, and what other employees are doing in their personal lives outside of work.

In short, employees are capable about gossiping about anything—and they do—in a workplace that fails to manage gossiping employees.

Many managers turn a blind eye to employee gossip (or worse, participate in it). This results in low employee morale and a toxic culture.

Many employees gossip about the amount of money they make—and often, they don’t tell the truth. So, unhappy coworkers beat a path to the Human Resources' door asking about their own salary.

By law, companies cannot prohibit employees from discussing their salaries, although many companies do have such policies.

Their intent is to avoid problems, but they are violating the law in so doing. Employers may not restrict employee discussions.



Expect a certain amount of gossip; people want to know what is going on in their workplace, and they like to discuss work issues. The key is to know when the gossip is out-of-hand.

You can manage gossip exactly as you would manage any other negative behavior from an employee in your workplace.

**Don't participate**, but turn it around: Usually people that gossip are insecure and want to gather supporters to listen to their hot off the press information. Don't do it. Be closed for business. Mention something positive about Andrew or something you really appreciate about him. Eventually you won't be fun to dump on anymore.

**Management must step in**: Since gossip is actually rated as a form of workplace violence, there is no one or group better to stop it than management. It is said, "In life you get what you tolerate," so if the morale in the company is dropping, the worst thing you can do as a leader is nothing.

**Create an office policy that bans gossip**: Here is a suggested policy put into print by one organization: "Do not participate in gossip and spreading rumors and do not tolerate it from others. (Gallagher, 2015)

**Identify and Talk to the Key Gossipers**: Address employees contributing to gossip problems headon. Set up a meeting to talk in a place where other employees will not overhear, which could make the situation worse. A confidential, safe space prevents embarrassment for the employee.

Help employees understand the impact of negative gossip and how their involvement directly contributed to the issue. Many people are unaware of how their actions affect others, causing unanticipated conflicts. To prevent the employee from feeling targeted, allow them to explain their side of the story. Sometimes managers get a truncated version of office gossip. Knowing the full

story helps you deal with the gossip objectively and resolve the conflict.

When multiple people are involved, address gossipers one-on-one instead of in a group. Allowing people to privately share their information gives you a better chance of learning the truth. Plus, discussing the issue in a group may embarrass employees and prevent them from trusting you in the future.

**Encourage Positive Gossip**: Sharing individual and team wins encourages positive gossip in the workplace. Positive gossip reinforces a strong team bond and improves morale. Employees feel proud of the work they've done and enjoy the recognition for their professional achievements.

Set aside time at staff meetings and allow employees to share positive gossip. Public sharing encourages team building and creates a cycle of positive behavior. Employees feel motivated to reach company goals. Although money is a strong motivator, public praise can be equally rewarding for some people.

Addressing negative gossip in the workplace keeps your team focused on producing results instead of nurturing anger and resentment. Effective managers notice the first signs of gossip

and stop the time wasting conversations before they spread. By meeting privately with both the individuals involved, you set ground rules and explain expectations for your management.

Instead of simply stopping gossip, focus on changing the conversation to discuss the positives and highlight the successes of your team. (Quast, 2013)

In the age of social media, it becomes easier to spread rumours and gossip about others. This can cause tremendous harm to the culture of the workplace. Organizations today need to deal with social media and keep an eye on emails, personal blogs and Facebook discussions among employees. Finally, confront rumours promptly. Providing factual information about layoffs, problematic situations or surplus of employees serve them better than to leave them speculating on their own. It is important to discuss the impact that gossip may have in the workplace. Discuss openly the differences between active communication and gossip. In today's workplace, verbal harassment has legal ramifications.

Employers have a duty to take action against verbal harassment when they become aware of it (Jensen, 2017)

**satisfaction**: The participants in an organization obviously want benefits, economic and otherwise, but also something else: they want organizational justice (OJ); that is the perception of the moral quality of how they are treated by the organization and by its other members. (Ferrari, 2015)

**Focus on open, honest, and regular communication.** It's also important to build a culture of mutual respect and integrity. Gossip are spread by people, so you can stop gossip at the source by talking about the negative effects of gossip and gossip, and by outlining your expectations. You probably won't ever stop gossip completely, however, you can use these strategies to create more harmony and trust within your work team

**Deal with gossip immediately:** Gossip can spread quickly, and they can often change and grow far beyond the small bit of truth that caused them to start. When you hear of a rumor, talk to the people involved. Where appropriate, hold a meeting to address the rumor, and then communicate the truth. Again, if you can't provide all of the details, be honest –and restate your policy about rumor and gossip in the workplace.

### **Conclusion:**

Workplace gossip is a widespread phenomenon around the world. Gossip in the workplace is on the whole characterized as positive or negative communication within organizations. Some view gossip as a positive effect, as such giving individuals the ability to form social bonds between colleagues.

However, gossip can be a tricky organizational phenomenon in that it can be both positive and negative at the same time. If gossip has not been managed in the past, gossip tends to become a negative aspect of your work culture. So, don't let negative gossip go unaddressed.

If employees are talking about other employees in a negative manner, it can have serious consequences. Frequently, in a toxic gossip culture, there is a small group of employees who cause the problems. They often have power and bully other employees and often can bully the boss.



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