

# The office informant

**Question:** I have been an admin. for about 2 years -- it is my first job out of college -- and I recently had my annual review. Everything went fine, but one point that I was told I need to work on was bringing information/gossip to my superiors.

I work for a small company and it is typical for me to hear things that are going on. I always felt that unless someone specifically asked me to talk to a superior for them, I should let them address the issues themselves and follow the appropriate chain of command. Apparently, my bosses feel differently. I was told to decide whether the gossip that I hear could be "detrimental or damaging to the company" and then let them know what I had heard and they would never say who they heard it from.

The problem is that I do work in a small company and it wouldn't take long for people to figure out where the information was coming from. Also, I understand that if there were to be a strike or something catastrophic of that nature, of course I would bring it to their attention. My problem is the "gray" (or "lighter") matters: hearing people blowing off steam, employees talking to old bosses (who are also competitors), etc.

What are the guidelines for reporting gossip to my bosses? -- *Trying to be Anonymous!*

## Comments

I think the way you are handling it is just perfect. Only bring higher level problems to your superiors. It sounds like people trust you to vent and you shouldn't be asked to "squeal."

When my manager asks me directly to give him information I will stand my ground and tell him that I won't break a confidence. Depending on the situation, I may tell him something I have heard but never reveal the source(s). I think he respects me for that even though he doesn't get what he wants.

**Posted by: Sandy | March 17, 2006 at 12:57 PM**

Wow! Tricky ground. I think your instincts are good. I'm surprised they were so blatant about asking you to inform for them. You're right, people would figure out who was carrying tales and you'd get the backlash. I'd only inform management if something truly significant was happening (illegal activities, unreported harassment, etc.) And even if they ask you to tattle, if you do it they will begin to mistrust your discretion. It's a rock and a hard place!

**Posted by: Anita C. | March 17, 2006 at 01:06 PM**

Completely unprofessional for management to ask such a thing! My goodness sakes! You are doing the right thing. Don't let this experience affect you. Sounds to me like you have a good head on your shoulders.

**Posted by: Julie | March 17, 2006 at 01:07 PM**

You keep doing just what you are doing! People look at you as a confidant and to be asked to have that broken is insensitive of your superior.

I serve as an executive assistant to a Sr. vice president and information and problems are shared with me almost daily. However, the information received is not shared because it is being shared confidentially. I serve as a "venting outlet", if you will, and if that confidentiality is broken it really can put a strain on how people in your office atmosphere will view you or any advice or feedback you may provide.

You keep doing what you are doing because it is your integrity that will be in question and not what your superior feels he/she thinks they need to know.

**Posted by: Valarie of Raleigh, NC | March 17, 2006 at 01:19 PM**

Don't do it. It sounds to me like you have an INSECURE BOSS, like me. If you repeat the wrong thing it will come back to haunt you.

**Posted by: Pat Conyers,GA | March 17, 2006 at 01:27 PM**

As young as you are, it is nice that people are able to confide in you. I have read the above comments and they are all good. However, they don't address your question. If you are "forced" to inform your superiors, while they may see it as being "productive", it is still gossip. Encourage the complainers to talk to Management who would be in a position to help them with their situation. If they are just talking to you to make a friendly conversation, then ignore it, just listen and forget. If you are to inform your superiors about a comment you heard because they were talking to you directly, it is still gossip and should not be repeated without the complainers permission. If they are seeking your help, and if you are not in a position to give them the answers they are seeking, then it is your right to tell them to go directly to management for help. Also, if you are a small company and everyone is chatting with you, how do you get your work done? So, perhaps you should tell them that you will be happy to listen to them after work hours and you need to get to work. This will stop people from using up your time, you are hired to work... hmmm

**Posted by: PJ | March 17, 2006 at 01:53 PM**

The problem with gossip is it is unreliable.  
Make you decision from that.

**Posted by: Idunk | March 17, 2006 at 02:03 PM**

I've got a different take on this. I've been an assistant for several "higher ups", and have been asked to do the same thing. The reasoning behind it has been that even in a small organization, when the boss comes around, people clam up. It's kind of like the saying that all the queen ever smells is fresh paint!

It's a way for the boss to be a bit more connected with what's important to the employees. What I've found to work best to avoid breaking confidences is to work in generalities. For example, if a couple people vent to me

about X, I'll let the boss know that there is a general feeling about X.

But judgement is very important. If it's just one person having a bad day, put it aside. If it's something that keeps coming up with one person, the next time that person vents, recommend to them that they take it to their manager. If it's something that you're hearing over and over again from more than one person, that's when you should take it to the boss. Management can't fix a problem if they don't know about it.

**Posted by: | March 17, 2006 at 02:12 PM**

As far as what guidelines you should use for sharing with the boss, I would keep it just as it was stated to you ("detrimental or damaging to the company"). I would only bring information to them that is of GRAND nature that would be possibly damaging to the company. I wouldn't share co-workers' complaints and venting...which on the scheme of things are not usually large ordeals, but employees who can't ever be satisfied. This puts you in a very weird position and could be a strange working environment. If I were you, I wouldn't concentrate spending my time looking chummy with co-workers, or the bosses will think you know more than you are sharing. Always be professional if you take anything to the boss and make sure all of your facts are accurate, otherwise, they might undervalue the help they have requested from you. Good luck!

**Posted by: TN | March 17, 2006 at 02:13 PM**

I think it would be safe to assume that when you were hired, your job duties did not include being the office snitch. I can't believe they are requesting that you do this! You need to be very careful if you decide to go through with what they ask. I would simply approach them and tell them that you are not comfortable betraying your colleagues' confidences. Perhaps you could suggest a different manner for which your colleagues can address concerns to the employer - for example the boss should make his or her office more accessible to address any problems that may exist; or even allow anonymous letters to be received that address the problems/rumors. The latter would be a good way for the boss to diffuse any growing problems or concerns about floating rumors with no truth to them.

**Posted by: Shannon | March 17, 2006 at 02:45 PM**

I agree with most of the other people who have already replied: Trust your judgment and don't become the office snitch. The only time it is appropriate to break this type of confidence is if someone is doing something illegal or immoral (like stealing from the company, committing fraud, or something like that).

You could do permanent damage to your own reputation if you start informing the higher-ups of every gripe that employees air. No one will trust you ever again. I was hired at a company about 16 years ago, where the person I was replacing was truly the office snitch. I had to live with the "legacy" of her behavior, and no one trusted me for a long time -- it took a long time for me to earn their trust, given what this other women had done to them. It's not worth it; trust your instincts and only report the most serious things, if absolutely necessary.

**Posted by: Lisa | March 17, 2006 at 05:33 PM**

I would not say anything. I think it was unprofessional for management to ask you that in the first place. If you are most recent hired could that be the reason? They may think that you want to impress and would do that. Because it is a small company it is sure to be known who is doing the telling and you would still have to work

with the others. It could create a tense working situation. God gave us all common sense. Keep using yours.

**Posted by: | March 20, 2006 at 11:34 AM**

You have exposed a very frequent situation, not only for a small office but even large companies can have this problem. You are right to be concerned about it. First, I would let your bosses know that you do not feel comfortable breaking any confidence, then let your co-workers know that while you are a good friend, you would rather they did not confide in you or spread gossip. That way you will not be responsible for keeping issues from your bosses or be blamed if 'word leaked out'. If they are ethical in any way they will respect you for this and not ask anymore of you, if not, do you really want to be working for them? You do sound like you have a good head on your shoulders, follow your instinct. You'll feel good about it, believe me.

**Posted by: Loretta Anderson | March 20, 2006 at 11:49 AM**

To thine own self be true! How can you trust a boss that is asking you to snitch on your co-workers? I would be looking for another job!

**Posted by: | March 20, 2006 at 04:13 PM**

I agree with Loretta. The only justification for reporting anything to the bosses is if you discover, on your own, something that is illegal or unethical. And maybe you should look for another job where the bosses will not try to make you into the office snitch.

**Posted by: Anonymous | March 20, 2006 at 06:45 PM**

This is a very big, red flag! Was this directive actually written into your review or was it delivered verbally? What has changed within the organization? Is this a company policy or your manager's policy? Don't allow company politics or a weak manager to contaminate your good values and undermine your character. Simply do not comply with this directive in any way. Spreading gossip is a dangerous strategy in which you will end up the loser. Absolutely no one values a gossip monger.

**Posted by: Marie | March 24, 2006 at 01:47 PM**

Excellent advice above - you can take it one step further and be proactive by holding your co-workers accountable. When they come to you with their problems, ask them what they are going to do about it. (I do this with most people because I hate complaining; tread carefully when it's your spouse?) If it is a serious issue they'll work to fix their problem and you may be able to offer direction; if not, perhaps they are just blowing off steam (say nothing) or having a pity party (offer encouragement for valid reasons later - they may need encouragement). Also, if you do feel a need to present a problem to management, ask what they are going to do to resolve the issues and if possible, you can present your ideas and help everyone involved. Good Luck.

**Posted by: | March 31, 2006 at 10:41 AM**

I don't think anyone can make a person reveal such information. The rule I follow is the gossip is not good, at anytime. Sometimes you have to vent and I think that is all right. If someone is trying to hurt the company in some way, that must be reported anonymously, if at all. Most people can hang themselves pretty good by themselves and don't need any help from anyone else. Go by your own gut.

**Posted by: Anonymous | April 17, 2006 at 08:26 AM**