

Ridding The Workplace Of Rumors And Gossip

Riddle me this: What's something everyone does and is impossible to stop? The answer: Gossip! Just because there is nothing you can do to *completely* eliminate it from your workplace, doesn't mean you shouldn't do a thing about it. On the contrary, you and your managers can and should take steps to eliminate harmful rumors and gossip from circulating in your workplace.

The Root Of The Problem

Start by addressing some of the most common causes of widespread gossip.

- Lack of communication. Foster an environment of open and honest communication. Keep employees informed about good *and* bad news to decrease their need to speculate and contribute to or rely on the office grapevine.
- Ignorance. Make sure employees are fully aware that starting and spreading rumors and gossip is unacceptable.
- Lack of respect. Managers must enforce workplace rules so employees understand the boundaries of bad behavior. This helps send the message that troublemakers (including rumormongers) will not be tolerated.
- Internal competitiveness. To get ahead, some individuals might resort to gossiping and back-stabbing. Watch for managers who pit employees against each other.
- Cliques. Managers should physically separate members of cliques by moving them to different workspaces in order to cut down gossip time.
- Reticence. Survey employees (this should be done anonymously) about their experience with rumors. Many employees will not speak openly about the rumormill for fear of becoming a target.

How To Cut The Office Grapevine...

If gossip persists, you might be inclined to adopt a strict no-gossiping rule. What seems like an easy fix, though, could become more trouble than it's worth. That's because gossip means different things to different people. So you need to define what the company means by gossip, and, unfortunately, that's not always as easy as it sounds.

Does it include any statement that cannot be confirmed by fact? Or only *negative* statements that cannot be confirmed? Do prohibited statements have to be about an employee? What if such statements are about employees' family or friends or even celebrities; does that amount to prohibited gossip?

A better (and easier!) course of action is to stick to broadly prohibiting any activity that disrupts the workplace, affects productivity, disparages others, or harms another's reputation. Your organization may already have this covered in your core values or other behavior-related policies.

...Down To Size!

Whether in addition to a no-gossip or general behavior rule or in place of one, here are some additional ideas for managing gossip.

1. At least annually, distribute a companywide memo that reiterates that starting and spreading rumors is inappropriate. Spell out the effects gossip has on others, the workplace, and employees' own self interests, such as their credibility in the eyes of management. Some employees don't fully understand the negative impact gossip can have. End by reminding employees that persistent gossipers will be subject to discipline.
2. Use performance appraisals as a weapon against gossiping. Managers should take the spreading of rumors into consideration when rating employees on teamwork, cooperation, integrity, productivity, etc.
3. Assign more work. If employees have time to stand around gossiping, obviously they don't have enough work to do. Suggest managers pass along some low-visibility projects (aka grunt work) to such employees.