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## Gossiping Workers

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Ask employees how they feel about gossip and you'll get the same answer from all of them: They dislike it. Yet ask those same people if gossip exists in their workplace and you'll get the same answer: absolutely. So, what gives?

Social scientists tell us gossip is a time honored and popular way to increase social functioning and connection. The truth is, we all gossip, because we all talk about other people. When we say we don't like gossip, what we really mean is that we don't like gossip about us or people we like.

The problem in the workplace, of course, is that gossip can poison environments, reduce productivity, and perpetuate nasty rumors. The best leaders make it clear that they will simply not tolerate gossip in any form. That means, of course, that they have to "walk the talk" and not gossip themselves.

The best way to deal with gossip is to head it off at the pass by making sure that your employees know from the start that you will not tolerate gossip. If you do that, and if you lead by example, you'll be much less likely to invite them to engage in this bothersome activity.

When you talk about gossip with employees initially, it's best to do so in a group and to give specific examples of why gossip is most damaging: company rumors, unfounded speculation about co-workers personal life, unannounced promotions, or whatever makes your personal list.

After that, you need to up the ante by making clear that they understand that beyond gossip lies defamation. *Defamation* is a legal term that refers to saying something false about another person that interferes with their reputation. The courts take defamation very seriously, especially in a workplace setting because

they realize that no matter what our job title; the only thing we really have to sell is our reputation. Once our reputation is damaged, we have nothing left to give at work.

As a manager, you have a special obligation to watch what your employees are saying after there's been a complaint and/or an investigation of some act of discrimination, threats, or other misconduct. The rumor mill goes into overdrive after one of these incidents. Unfortunately, most of the rumors are untrue (in fact, much worse than the truth) and can lead to defamation claims.

If you've had one of these upsets in your workgroup, you need to call a meeting, warn them about defamation issues, and make sure that they understand you will impose discipline for anyone you hear has talked about this issue. You may be able to convince HR or legal to come in and give them a sanitized version of what did actually occur so that employees don't have to keep speculating. Regardless, it is your job to squash any rumors and make sure that they don't keep happening.

It helps to ask your troops to imagine how they would feel if someone were spreading rumors about them. Personnel matters need to be kept private, as your employees would agree if they were going through a complaint or an investigation.