



GOSSIP AND THE TANGLED WEB IT WEAVES

There is an old schoolyard chant that goes “*Sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me*”. The original author of this chant must have had incredible self-esteem (or lived in a dream world) because for most of us words *can* hurt. Harmful words can inflict considerable damage on individuals and relationships - and this damage, unlike the damage of broken bones, sometimes never completely heals.

One form of harmful words is malicious gossip – rumor & innuendo based on incomplete “facts” or downright fiction spread with the intent to cause turmoil or discredit certain individuals or institutions. Another less insidious form of harmful words is speculative gossip – rumor based on assumptions about “what the future holds” or what is currently going on. When applied in the workplace, both forms of gossip can have serious consequences on the morale and productivity of the Center. If left unchecked, both forms may breed increased negativity and stress, friction among co-workers and ultimately increased turnover.

Speculative Gossip

All organizations have an informal communications network – the company grapevine. Communications Centers are no different – the Center grapevine is “alive and kicking” in Centers around the Country. The grapevine can be a positive source of Center information based on factual knowledge or a negative source of Center information based on speculative gossip. The key to whether it is positive or negative is the communications structure within the Center. Speculative gossip about the Center typically occurs out of a need to fill a void in employees’ “need to know”. This void is created when management fails to communicate effectively with employees about issues that affect the Center and its employees. A Center grapevine actively circulating speculative gossip about the Center should be a “red flag” to management that there is a serious communications breakdown between management and employees. To help cure this breakdown and negate speculative gossip based on rumor and false information managers should take a proactive stance and flood the grapevine with correct information. This is done by making sure employees know management has an open-door policy and is willing to share to the best of its knowledge and ability, information about events and news in and around the Center. This information sharing

should be formal and informal. Formal information sharing is communicating via policy or informational memos, staff meetings and Center newsletters. Informal information sharing is communicating via face-to-face chats, actively listening/responding to employees' needs and concerns and remaining aware of grapevine chatter, immediately responding if false information is circulating.

Malicious Gossip

Malicious gossip also feeds the Center grapevine. However, unlike speculative gossip it is spread with the sole intent to cause turmoil or discredit certain individuals. Malicious gossip whether directed towards the Center or an individual cannot be reduced by simply improving the communications structure within the Center because the motivation behind the gossip is not to fill a "need to know" void it is to create disharmony and inflict pain. It is an unfortunate fact that some people feed on malicious gossip and enjoy spreading it about others. Their motivation could be jealousy or personal dislike or revenge for a perceived grievance or a perverse sense of power gratification; however, whatever the motivation it should never be tolerated in the Center.

It should be noted that the issue here is malicious gossip. It is quite typical for normal conversations to contain some "gossip". For instance, co-worker Mary during the course of a conversation says to co-worker John, "I heard Jane went to Florida on her vacation". Gossip? Yes. Malicious? No. It is quite unlikely that this information will cause hard feelings or disturb Jane if she becomes aware of it. However, if co-worker Mary said, "I heard Jane went to Florida on her vacation and did you know that Officer Smith took his vacation at the same time? I bet the two of them went to Florida together. I've seen the way they look at each other". The malicious gossip seed is sown and as it is spread throughout the Center, it changes from speculation to "fact". Jane and Officer Smith's reputations are tarnished and hard feelings and friction among co-workers emerges.

Malicious gossip should never be tolerated in the Center – the consequences are too high. The inherent stress associated with job tasks and shift work requirements is heavy enough – relationship stress caused by malicious gossip increases this burden to the point where the stress may become too heavy to handle.

There are two primary things that can be done to root out the perpetrators of malicious gossip and nip this type of behavior in the bud. First and foremost, management should establish written performance standards specifically prohibiting harmful gossip, back-biting and rabble-raising. These performance standards should be clearly delineated to all employees and strictly enforced. Malicious gossipers should be made aware that there are serious consequences to this type of behavior – that it is harmful to co-workers and the Center and that perpetrators face disciplinary action including when circumstances warrant, termination.

Second, co-workers should strive to discourage this type of behavior by rebuffing the gossipers' attempts to ensnare them in his/her tangled web. The malicious gossipers need the assistance of others for the impact of the gossip to be fully realized. If co-workers refuse to participate, the gossip goes nowhere. Further, if co-workers report the malicious gossipers to management and management acts accordingly the gossipers should soon realize that they are only hurting themselves, not their intended victim(s).

If left unchecked the tangled web of gossip ensnares the morale & productivity of the Center. It increases negativity and stress, causes friction among co-workers and ultimately leads to increased turnover. Management and employees have the responsibility to ensure that speculative and malicious gossip is nipped in the bud so that the *professionals* in the Center can fulfill their critically important mission in an environment free of unprofessional and petty distractions.

By Candice Solie, APCO Institute Director

Quiz

CDE Article – Gossip

Name: _____ Date: _____

Agency: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

Fax: _____

Email: _____

1. If co-workers refuse to listen to harmful gossip, it dies on the vine.
 - a. True
 - b. False

2. Agency Policy & Procedure should address gossip and it's negative consequences.
 - a. True
 - b. False

3. Speculative gossip usually occurs because of a breakdown in the communications network between administration and staff.
 - a. True
 - b. False

4. The office grapevine can be useful when flooded with correct and factual information.
 - a. True
 - b. False

5. Rumor and innuendo can negatively effect moral and productivity.
 - a. True
 - b. False