

Gossip

as a Corporate Sport



by Ann McGee-Cooper, Ed.D

"Have you heard the latest?" "Well that's not the half of it! I heard..."

We've all been in on the grapevine of underground rumors and gossip, rampant in corporate America. Now, there is a new spin on all this negativity due to the increasing speed of change, increased uncertainty and therefore increasing anxiety for many. When we don't know and can't know what's coming next, one way we medicate our fears is to feed on juicy rumors. It's important as leaders and partners to understand this dynamic, how it works, why it works and what we can do to heal the dysfunction in ourselves and our teams. So, why do we get so focused on the misfortune of others?

Three Common Causes of Gossip

First, all the attention "out there" can make us feel safe. The problem is "out there" and we are "in here," so we aren't involved. We delude ourselves into believing that we are somehow not a part of all that's happening, so we must be safe.

Second, sharing secret stories is a form of bonding. If you show interest and agree with my rumor, we feel closer. It's an unspoken pact, something like, "we are so good and they are so shocking or bad or inept or whatever." And for the short time we are sharing, we feel affirmed and strangely safe.

Third, we don't want to be left out of the information loop. If everyone else knows that a "situation" is going on, we don't want to be "the last to know." We could choose not to listen to the gossip, but what if it is really something we need to know about? We may not want to confront the bearer because we want to stay in the loop.

Untangling the Grapevine

Whether on the perimeter or the front lines, here are some suggestions for untangling the grapevine of gossip.

1. If you are the target of a rumor, check it out ASAP, being careful to not report it as fact

but rather as hearsay. For example, "I am told that you were highly offended by my remarks in our meeting yesterday. Is this true and if so, please help me understand why?" By slowing down to check out assumptions respectfully and openly, most issues can be resolved before they fester.

2. If there was an audience for the event, you might want to correct the error for this audience. For example, "Yesterday in our meeting I made a statement that was taken as discounting my friend, Pam, and her team's efforts. Let me apologize and make clear that I meant to be questioning the timing and method. In no way did I intend disrespect and I apologize if that wasn't clear."
3. Healthy people can hold highest trust and respect for each other, yet disagree vigorously on a great many issues. It is HOW you communicate your disagreement that shows or betrays your level of trust and respect. For example, "I highly respect the twenty plus years of experience you bring to this issue. However, I see it very differently and believe that we need a fresh, non-traditional approach. I hope you will be willing to consider my suggestion." Search for the person who sees life most differently from you. If you can partner with that person to hear their perspective and concerns and get them to understand your position, together you can model a refreshing level of trust and strength through difference.
4. When you hear anything that smacks of rumor or gossip, respectfully question the carrier. For example, "That doesn't sound like something Joe would do (or say). How sure are you of your source?" "Could that have been the way his remarks felt rather than what he actually said?" "Before we accept this as true, don't we owe it to our partner, Joe, to make sure we are understanding his meaning?"



Firmly choosing not to participate in rumor or gossip and making others aware that in doing so, we all weaken the trust and health of our team can be a bold step toward correcting this dysfunction.

I grew up during World War II when there was a famous saying, "Loose lips sink ships!" It meant that information leaked to the enemy could cost American lives. Perhaps we could still learn by remembering that piece of wisdom.

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