

Gossip Research

Study about the role of gossip in organisations

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January 27, 2015

Why we love to gossip about our managers

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"How on earth did he manage to land such a job?" "Any clue what she does all day?" "If I were you, I wouldn't put too much energy in the job - he won't reward you anyway." We always have a multitude of good reasons to gossip about our managers, and usually, have lots to say!

If the amount of articles written on this topic is any indication, most managers do their utmost to try and prevent employees from gossiping: [How to address](#)

[Office Gossip as a](#)

[Manager](#), [Managing: How to Stop employees from gossiping](#), [Negative Effects of Office Gossip on the Work Environment](#) and [How to Stop Office Gossip Once and for All](#) are but a few examples.

[Lisa Quast, in Forbes magazine](#) warns managers that allowing negative workplace gossip to flourish can lead to a culture of distrust, affect productivity, morale, and engagement. "New managers should act quickly - unless stopped, pervasive negative gossip can be like a disease that spreads, wreaking havoc throughout a department (and even throughout a company)."

Some employers have even tried to implement a no-gossip-policy at the workplace. Some punish gossip by terminating employment and / or suing for civil damages.



But as Harry Gorden, a management consultant, observes, many businesses have policies on office gossip without really understanding why or how gossip takes place to begin with.

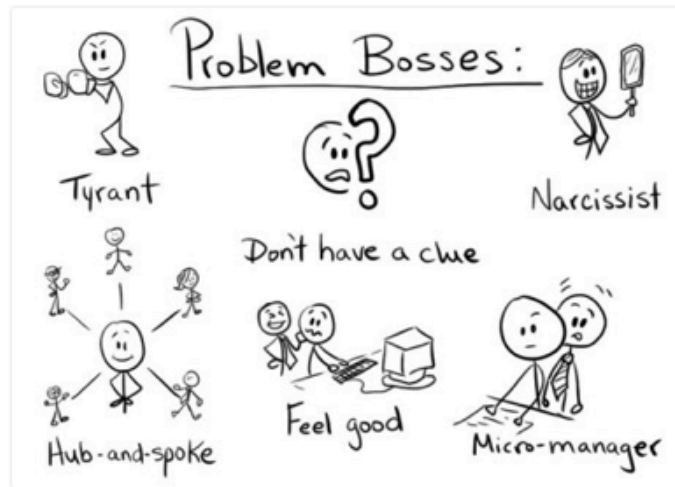
So what actually causes employees to gossip? Are there certain conditions which make gossip more likely to flourish?

[Wittek and Wieler](#) (1998) examined the social patterns that could lead to gossip. There are always three players involved: the gossipmonger (which they call ego), the listener (alter) and the person being

discussed (tertius). The authors found that when the ego and alter have a good relationship with each other, and they both know and dislike the tertius, this will lead to more gossip. This is the coalition triad. They have examined other forms of triads, such as the constraint triad, where ego knows tertius but alter doesn't. Even if ego and alter have a good relationship, alter won't be as interested in hearing gossip about tertius. In the closure triad, ego, alter and tertius all have good relationships with each other, but although people do gossip about common friends, it is not as juicy as when tertius is an enemy or rival.



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The authors conclude that “it is not mutual friends but mutual enemies that are the topic of most gossip.” And that within organisations, supervisors and managers are most often the targets. “Since they have control and authority, there is by definition a negative element in the relation between boss and workers. Workers thus have a common interest in forming a coalition.”

[Clegg and van Iterson](#) (2009) explain that change usually brings on discontent, which causes unhappy employees to revert to negative gossip. “Lower order members’ cool out those change projects of the authorities that they find disagreeable, make mockery and show cynicism in ‘hidden transcripts’ of counter power.”

By doing this, subordinates try to subvert power, resist it, and push and probe for weak spots... “Moments of resistance such as these will rarely if ever overcome the system, but these small bursts of pleasure do serve to make domination more bearable and less injurious.”

Indeed, [Ellwardt et al](#) (2011) show that employees of a subordinate status gossip more negatively about managers than employees of management or supervisory status. “Gossip is a weapon of the weak,” they claim, “and is often a way of resisting change.” And while subordinates resist change by gossiping, they do so without immediately harming their relationship with their boss.



However, the authors found that resistance to change and rank alone were not the main factors contributing to negative gossip. More importantly, lack of trust in management played a greater role in increasing negative gossip.

The ones who have it most difficult, according to Ellwardt et al. are the middle managers. Even if they did not make the decisions to change within the organisation, employees tend to blame them, as they associate them with management in general. Unlike subordinates, middle managers are less likely to gossip about their managers, as it would not only harm their superiors’ reputations, but also theirs...

In his article, [Office Gossip: Management Creates or Prevents](#), Harry Gorden claims that management plays a huge role in determining whether gossip will be prevalent or not in an organisation. “The presence of gossip should be seen by management as a reflection of their performance and organizational effectiveness.”



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If managers are insecure, and do not communicate effectively with their teams, employees will tend to revert to gossip. Managers that give negative feedback rather than constructive criticism and encouragement, trigger jealousy and rivalry in their teams. If they hole themselves up in their offices and avoid their employees, they will create a work culture that lets gossip thrive.

But even if our managers succeeded in creating a fantastic work environment and managed to gain our trust, would they really succeed in eliminating all gossip on the work floor? Wouldn't there always be something to gossip about? And is that really so bad?



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