



JOAN GARBO CONSULTING

PREMIER CHANGE AGENT



GOSSIP GOSSIP GOSSIP

Have you ever noticed how we respond to the word “gossip”? Like a magnet draws iron filings to it, we are drawn to people and situations that feed the darker side of our humanness. Just the mere mention of the word and our ears perk up! Gossip has such a strong attraction for people that every major newspaper has a “gossip column”, the National Enquirer is one of the largest selling newspapers in this country, and Jerry Springer now has one of the most popular “talk” shows.

Despite its popularity and attraction, very few would argue the fact that gossip is nasty and damaging to one’s sense of well-being, reputation, relationships, and effectiveness. Perhaps one of factors that spur people on to listen to and even spread gossip is that many people

measure their own success by others’ failings, whether they are real or imagined. So if I know that someone else has messed up, I feel better about myself and the circumstances in my life.

In the strictest definition, gossip is any conversation about someone that takes place in his/her absence. In this sense, gossip is not restricted to negative comments. While this may be an accurate definition, I believe it is too broad to be useful. In the workplace, I use a more limited and useful definition: **Gossip is a complaint that you have about someone that you take to someone who can do nothing about it!**

In a typical scenario, Susie has a problem with Jane, but she goes to Mary and says, “Did you hear what Jane did?”

Immediately, Mary's ears perk up and she says, "NO, what did she do?" Susie proceeds to tell Mary how mean and nasty Jane was and how Susie was so hurt and upset by her.

Before Mary passes on the juicy tidbit of gossip to someone else, she responds to Susie, "Well, if you think that's bad, let me tell you what I heard she did last month!" And so it goes. If you have ever played the game "operator" where someone whispers a short message to someone who passes it on to someone else who repeats it to someone else, etc., you know that by the time the last person says what they heard, the message is totally different than what was originally said.

Thus, the problem Susie had with Jane begins to escalate because when Mary retells the story, it will change some.

If Mary doesn't actually know Jane, when she does meet her, Mary's view of her is totally influenced by Susie's problem with Jane.

When I ask people why they don't just tell the person directly, I get a variety of reasons and justifications: "I don't want to hurt her feelings," "He doesn't listen, and he might fire me," "She's got everyone snowed, and she'll turn everyone else against me," "I hate confrontations, and I'm no good at it," "It won't make any difference, so why bother?"

While I agree that telling someone something could be perceived as "bad news" and we may fear that some people shoot the messenger, the damage that gossip inflicts is costly beyond our immediate perception.

Gossip is rampant in most any work place. Many times, people don't even know they are gossiping--they think it is just normal chit chat--or the person spreading the gossip thinks she/he is doing people a favor by "warning" them. As an illustration of this, I was doing a consult in a practice and was observing the doctor and staff going through their morning "huddle." As they were reviewing the schedule for the day, the doctor said to a chair side assistant, "Carol, I want you to take Mrs. X today."

Carol immediately replied, "That's not fair, doctor, I had her last time! It's Betty's turn to take her!" And a minor dispute ensued between Carol and Betty.

While this was going on, the new receptionist who had been hired the previous week, turned and asked another staff member, "Who's Mrs. X?" The reply was, "Don't worry, you'll know her the minute she comes in, and she's going to know you're new, so don't let her run over you."

I stopped the meeting and asked what was the problem they had with Mrs. X. They told me she was always angry, late for appointments, behind on payments, and her kids were disruptive brats. Sound familiar?

I then asked them if anger could be a cover-up for some other emotion, and they said "yes." For instance, some people express anger when they are afraid, sad, frustrated, in pain, and so on. My point is that we may think we know what is going on with a person, the truth is we don't really know.

"Gossip is a complaint that you have about someone that you take to someone who can do nothing about it!"

The staff and doctor then agreed to interact with Mrs. X as if she had no history with them. Also, if and when they saw her act in a “negative” way, they would pretend she was actually in pain, or afraid, etc. At the end of the day, the doctor and staff met again briefly and discussed what had happened with Mrs. X. Mostly she was very quiet that day, and appeared to be wondering what was going on. When I followed this up six months later, they told me Mrs. X now was a lot friendlier, current on her payments, on time for her appointments, usually came in with some treats for the staff, and had become one of their better referral sources. Even her children seemed better behaved!

I sincerely believe that the overwhelming majority of people who gossip do so without actually intending to hurt anyone. Mostly people don't stop to think about the impact the gossip can have on people, and they don't know how to be more direct with others without hurting people's feelings. So how does one stop gossip in the workplace?

The answer is multi-fold. First, everyone must agree that gossip is damaging and is an unacceptable way to deal with problems and complaints.

Second, they must then agree on what is the acceptable way to deal with these issues. One staff decided to use a code word. Whenever they heard anyone gossip or they suspected that any conversation was slipping into gossip, they would call out the code word. (In this instance, Batman!) The conversation would then come to an immediate stop, and the person who had been talking would agree to handle the situation with the person with whom she/he was upset. Another staff decided to carry metal clickers in their pockets and used the clicker to stop the gossip.

Third, everyone must agree not to listen to gossip, and that listening to gossip without stopping it gives tacit permission for the gossip.

Despite the risk people feel about being open and honest in their communications and relationships, the damage that gossip does is immeasurable. Mostly we damage our own self-esteem when we gossip, because at some level we know how nasty gossip. Ann Landers has frequently printed and made famous an article on gossip:

*My name is gossip. I have no respect for justice
I maim without killing. I break hearts and I ruin lives.
I am cunning and malicious and gather strength with age.
The more I am quoted, the more I am believed.
I flourish at every level of society.
My victims are helpless. They cannot protect themselves
against me because I have no name and no face.
To track me down is impossible. The harder you try, the more
elusive I become.
I am nobody's friend.
Once I tarnish a reputation, it is never the same.
I topple governments and wreck marriages.
I ruin careers and cause sleepless nights, heartache and
indigestion.
I spawn suspicion and generate grief.
I make innocent people cry in their pillows.
Even my name hisses. I am called gossip.
Office gossip. Shop gossip. Party gossip. Telephone
gossip. I make headlines and headaches.
Before you repeat a story ask yourself
Is it fair? Is it necessary?
If not -- shut up.*

Need I say more?

Joan Garbo is a trainer and consultant specializing in effective communication skills, team building, and client relations. For information on office consults, executive coaching or speaker presentations call or write to: Joan Garbo, Joan Garbo Consultants
19 Glen Ln., Copiague NY 11726 • 631-608-2979
website: joangarbo.com email: joangarbo@aol.com