



Coffee Break



Evolutionary psychologists claim that gossip is hard-wired into the human psyche. However, unless controlled, it can wreak havoc within a corporation.

Gossip Girl

SHARING A JOKE at Brad and Angelina's expense or poking fun at J.Lo's saucy red carpet ensembles can bring a little light relief to the office. Spreading tittle-tattle about the on-off romance of Gord and Samantha from member services, however, can turn a laughing matter into a management issue.

Most of us like to gossip but, left unchecked, it can pollute the work environment, says John Hearn, senior manager, employee engagement, at **Servus Credit Union** in Alberta. "You can't underestimate the power of gossip," says Hearn. "It can be destructive, it can be harmful and it can destroy a culture that an organization has tried so hard to build."

Evolutionary psychologists tell us that gossiping is hard-wired into the human psyche. That idle chit chat at the water cooler is not merely a displacement activity for real work but a shared habit that bonds us together by allowing us to hone our social skills, set our values and expectations and improve our status within a group.

So when does harmless gossip become poisonous and how do you know when small talk crosses the line into invasion of privacy, bullying and harassment?

For John Burton, who teaches business ethics and personal and social responsibility at the University of British Columbia Okanagan in Kelowna, the truth is no defence. "It doesn't matter if something is true. If it's inappropriate information that shouldn't be a part of the office grapevine, it is gossip," Burton says.

Being sympathetic about someone's health issues or family situation is a natural impulse. Snide remarks and repeated conversations with the subject out of earshot is simply idle curiosity dressed up as concern. If you take part in a

conversation that would make you blush if it was played back to you, you know you've overstepped the mark.

Sometimes it's just hard to avoid inappropriate social banter and in certain situations it would be plain rude or awkward to walk away. But you don't have to play along, says Hearn, who has implemented a respectful workplace policy at Servus. "It can be a real challenge to recognize that something is gossip, but if you can't stop it you can at least not participate in it or repeat what you hear."

The next time you're tempted to spread a hot little tidbit of information, examine your own motivations. Recent research from psychology professor Frank McAndrew at Knox College in Illinois suggests that we often have ulterior motives for spreading rumours. In his paper, *Who Do We Tell and Whom Do We Tell On? Gossip as a Strategy for Status Enhancement*, he reports that "damaging, negative news about rivals, and positive news about friends and lovers, was especially prized and likely to be passed on."

If you find yourself constantly bitching about one of your co-workers, try to distinguish between character assassination and legitimate work grumble. If their behaviour is really affecting their performance and not just providing you with fresh material for the gossip hour, it's time to have a quiet word with your supervisor.

Erica Pinsky, a Vancouver-based consultant specializing in workplace discrimination, harassment and bullying, says if you can't shut the gossip down you can try to support the victim. "If you hear some rumour about someone having a loss or some significant challenge in their life, the respectful choice might be to approach that person one-on-one and offer your support."

If you know you're being talked about behind your back, don't suffer in silence. "Gossip can be a type of workplace bullying and no one should have to put up with it," says Pinsky. "In really extreme cases it can be catastrophic and people can be bullied into psychological illness."

If you've got the confidence, Pinsky suggests you should track down the source of the rumours and try and reason with the individual. Ask for a meeting in a private but neutral area such as a meeting room. Be as non-confrontational as possible, state your case, explain that the gossip is hurtful and simply ask for it to stop. You can also use the opportunity to correct any misconceptions and misunderstandings that have been created. "Often when people are called out on their actions, they will change," says Pinsky who helped **North Shore Credit Union** in North Vancouver, BC, craft its respectful workplace policy.

"When gossip really becomes toxic in an office environment, it's time to take the issue to management," says Burton. Although most organizations don't have specific rules against gossip, they'll have clear written policies covering issues such as psychological harassment and offensive behaviour.

Many credit unions take pride in their positive workplace culture. If you can't resist the temptation of gossip, your toxic tongue could not only damage your reputation but your credit union's too. You could also leave your employer open to human rights or anti-discrimination and harassment lawsuits.

So if you want to gossip at work, stick to distant celebrities. You won't have to worry about a visit from human resources and Brad Pitt is very unlikely to lodge a formal complaint. **E**