

## Career Know-How

### Did You Hear? Three Surefire Steps to Minimize Gossip at the Office

by [Kate Zabriskie](#)

It starts out innocently enough with someone in the break room saying, "Isn't it a shame about Jack?" Clueless, you reply, "What about Jack?" "Don't you know about his wife?" When you answer in the negative, your colleague seizes the moment to fill you in on all the gory details of Jack's wife's ongoing affair with none other than your boss's husband, and poor Jack is now in rehab because he started binge-drinking to drown his misery. Of course, since your boss's husband is the party of the second part, you just have to know if she knows about her husband's infidelity, which would account for her showing up to work lately looking like a subject in a sleep-deprivation study and biting everyone's head off for no good reason. And before you've finished pouring your coffee, you've enabled a gossip to perpetuate the vicious cycle of rumor mongering that too often contaminates a workplace.

The consequences of participating in office gossip are far ranging and always affect at least two or more people. First, consider the person who is the gossip spreader. Why is this person presenting the information? Can any good come from it? Will the information benefit you or the office in which you work? What's in it for the gossip?

If the answers to these questions are fuzzy, you can probably assume the news bearer is reveling in knowing something others don't yet know. Such "news," whether accurate or not, provides a momentary feeling of superiority and control that the gossip probably lacks otherwise. If this person's work performance isn't sufficient cause for recognition, then the next best option is to stake a claim as the one with the latest inside dirt.

Unfortunately, a gossip isn't satisfied just possessing the information. After all, knowledge that isn't shared is wasted, right? How would others know the value of this soul unless the intelligence is disseminated? This is where others get implicated without necessarily being willing participants. Even the "innocent" are drawn in to the gossip's web by merely listening. For a few fleeting moments, this person has everyone's undivided attention, and this is "reward" enough.

While gossips themselves might not immediately suffer for their loose tongues, eventually they will be found out. The consequences may include poor performance reviews, no pay raises, reprimands from supervisors, or possibly dismissal because of their involvement in destroying office morale or committing slander.

Gossips are usually proactive in sharing their wealth of information, so others have little trouble knowing who they are. Smart coworkers will learn to avoid them any way they can, even though this is not always easy or possible. Even if you yourself don't initiate gossip, just listening to it takes a toll and carries consequences. Guilt by association immediately comes to mind. If several

people are present when a gossip leaks a juicy tidbit, you may be credited as the source at some later point just because you were present. People's memories aren't always accurate.

Of course, the one who suffers most is the subject under discussion. Even if the rumor proves to be just that, the damage has been done. Those who have heard the gossip will be unable to completely erase it from their minds. The consequences for this person might be devastating.

Since no one benefits from gossip, here are three easy steps you can take to avoid this career-killing behavior:

1. Don't do it yourself-ever. No, you aren't talking about people for their own good. You're gossiping. If you really want to help someone, talk to the person directly.

2. When someone tries to gossip with you, you can:

- Walk away
- Change the subject.
- Directly state, "I'm not comfortable talking about \_\_\_\_\_."
- Directly state, "I don't like talking about other people because I don't like them talking about me." That's a conversation ender for sure.
- Reply, "I hadn't heard that about \_\_\_\_\_. Let's go ask him/her." (Watch a gossip disappear when you say that. Gossips are notorious cowards and dread confronting their subjects.)

3. When someone is gossiping about you, you can:

- Go with the direct approach. Say something such as, "I heard that you've been saying the following about me." Then briefly summarize what you have heard. Next, say, "While I wasn't there to hear you, I would appreciate your coming to me directly with any questions or comments rather than talking with our coworkers/friends/family/etc."
- Go with the indirect approach. Say something such as, "I don't know if you've heard the rumors going around about me or not, but they're really disturbing. If you hear of anyone talking about me, I would appreciate it if you would ask them to stop."

Just remember, if you don't gossip, you don't have to worry about someone betraying your confidence and telling other people what you said.

Remember, too, to distance yourself from gossips since you are known by the company you keep.

