

Why office gossip can be good

By Nikki Williamson.

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Office gossip might work to your advantage if you use it wisely.

Have you heard the latest rumour about plans to downsize staff at your work? How about the scuttlebutt on the new boss? Or the juicy story that HR is conducting an audit of improper computer use?

If you answered yes to any of these, chances are you're tapped into the office gossip network.

There's no need to feel ashamed. Experts believe keeping abreast of workplace gossip is healthy and can be beneficial to your career. Just remember to follow a few simple rules and you can gasbag to your heart's content.

Sociologists say while some gossip can be malicious, in general the activity is a type of informal communication about objects and events, as well as who's doing what, where and with whom. Gossiping forges social bonds. We trust the people we are gossiping with and learn what is and isn't acceptable from their responses.

A recent study by University College London has found gossiping is extremely common. We spend between one-fifth and two-thirds of our conversational time doing it. And despite the perception, only a comparatively small amount of gossip is dedicated to criticising the behaviour of others.

Candy Tymson, a business educator and speaker, says while we may be uncomfortable with the notion of gossip, it is necessary if we want to be clued-in to what's going on in the office.

"Every organisation needs an informal grapevine so information can pass through," she says.

Tymson views gossiping as a form of networking, particularly when the talk focuses on information that can be used to place oneself better for promotion or other benefits.

US communications coach and author Susan RoAne agrees that we need to rethink our notions of gossip.

"The good old office grapevine has received a tremendous amount of bad press," she says. "But if [it's] used properly, it can be a powerful career aid. It can provide you with a great deal of useful information, including rumours, many of which become fact."

For Tymson it's simply about conversing with colleagues. "Everyone needs to have a conversation," she says. Whether it starts with the phrase "have you heard?" or "are you aware?" the result is that information is being passed around. And this could very well change the path of your career or put you in a better position to get where you want to go, only faster.

Using the grapevine, RoAne says, isn't about starting or spreading rumours, it's about cultivating sources of information.

"We are in an information society," she says. "Spurning informal information is naive."

The key, RoAne believes, is to learn how to listen and listen well.

"Listen to the conversations of subordinates and supervisors," she says, suggesting you eavesdrop on conversations in staff rooms, meetings and even in bathrooms.

Tymson also suggests cultivating people who would most obviously be in the know.

"It's easy to identify people who are in spaces of influence, who hear what's going on," she says.

So, if you've heard something that you think might be an opportunity for furthering your career, what should you do? Tymson says you should first try fact-checking what you've heard.

"If it's appropriate, go back to the source," she says.

If you can't and there is no other reliable way to check, she recommends taking what you've heard with a pinch of salt.

"Don't make important decisions based on what you've heard," she says. "But do keep it mind."

It's also a good idea to talk to those you trust about what you've heard. However, RoAne places one caveat on this.

"Never repeat information that is of a personal nature about another person," she says.

Managers can also use gossip. Grant Michelson, author and research director at Audencia Nantes Business School in France, says employers can use gossip to test the water if they're considering major changes.

Michelson has looked at the role of office gossip extensively and believes managers who use the grapevine effectively can head-off scaremongering and negativity.

"Finding out things on the grapevine is very important to management in trying to anticipate problems."

An ear to the ground

Stephen Cross is a project manager for a large government department. He uses gossip in the workplace to help him to manage staff and his projects.

"You listen and you put things together to get a clearer picture of what might be going on," he says. "I always make sure I have a plan B or contingencies in place in case the rumours turn out to be fact."

Keeping the information generated by office chat in mind makes his job easier. "Having a mental file in place means I'm ready for anything."

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