

## **Definition of Rumors and Gossiping:**

**Rumors:** A story or statement in circulation without confirmation or certainty as to facts,

**Gossiping:** Idle talk or rumor, especially about the personal or private affairs of others.

## **THE EEO CORNER:**

### **Workplace Gossip Can Be Harmful To An Individual And The Organization**



As the Director of the Equal Employment Opportunity Program at the National Training Center I have witnessed a growing concern among Supervisor/Managers and Employees about the injurious and negative effects of gossiping. As the EEO Director I see too much of this, much too often. Repeatedly, I explain the avenue of redress to individuals that are affected by gossip. One of the things I have been asked many times is how to combat this destructive behavior. This series will address the concerns of Senior Management, DA Civilians, Family members, and contractors. I will offer some solutions to this problem in three parts. At the end of the series, I hope that we as a family at the NTC can learn that when we injure one another with harmful gossip, it is damaging too us all.

#### **Part 1**

It seems so harmless. The little chitchat at the water cooler or in the Gazebo or, at the bus stop about so and so. This is gossip. The debate over someone's relationship with someone else you happen to see at one of the many eating establishments here at Fort Irwin. Any speculation about a person is gossip. Is it chitchat or is it gossip? How can you tell the difference? And who cares? There is a very big difference, and it is an important one, because gossip that runs amok can be

dangerous and destructive in a workplace. First, while light conversation can be neutral, gossip is often negative, inflammatory and embarrassing to the person being spoken of. So how does one tell the difference between idle chatter and gossip? Here is a test: Consider the impact of what is being said. Does it cast negative, slanderous remarks? Does it create rifts? Does it wallow in the misfortune of others? Does it have a negative emotional charge? Does it serve to perpetuate conflict or negativity? Is it hurtful or damaging? Is it something you would say in front of that person?

Technically, any sharing of trivial or unsubstantiated information can be considered gossip. But you have to consider the sentiment. For example, if it were rumored that a co-worker is being promoted, and you discuss it with another co-worker, is that gossip? If the discussion is hurtful or damaging or negative, then yes, it is gossip. But if its value is neutral then it's not gossip at all. If the story is told with negativity and without good will, then it is gossip.

### **Gossip hurts:**

Gossip has many adverse side effects on an organization. It can increase conflict and decrease morale. It results in strained relationships. Gossip breaks down the trust level within the group, which results in employees second-guessing each other and ultimately running to the supervisor to clarify the directions or instructions, or to settle the differences that will arise. Gossip is the death of teamwork as the group breaks up into cliques and employees start refusing to work with others. Rampant negative gossip also results in the supervisor spending an enormous amount of time trying to figure out who said what to whom. Productivity is lost, as are good employees who do not want to work in such a toxic environment. All actions are covered under The Table of Penalties.

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## Breaking The Gossip Cycle

### Part II

Let's say you are not a gossip. You simply listen to your coworkers so as not to be rude. But here's the thing that most people don't realize—as a listener, you are a co-narrator to the gossip. In other words, active listening actually supports and promotes gossiping. The more you listen, the more you encourage it. If you don't listen, the gossip has nowhere to go.

### Here's how to get out of the gossip pipeline:

- Be busy. Gossipmongers want attention. If you're preoccupied with your work, you can't be available to listen to their latest story.
- Don't participate. Walk away from the story. Don't give visual clues that you are interested in listening. If someone passes a juicy story on to you, don't pass it any further. Take personal responsibility to act with integrity.
- Turn it around by saying something positive. It isn't nearly as much fun to spread negative news if it's spoiled by a complimentary phrase about the person being attacked
- Avoid the gossip. If you notice one person who consistently makes trouble, take the necessary actions to have as little interaction with that person as possible.
- Keep your private life private. Don't trust personal information with coworkers. Remember, if they are gossiping about others, they will gossip about you, too.
- Choose your friends wisely at work. Share information sparingly until you are sure that you have built up a level of trust. Also, close association with gossipers will give the perception that you are a gossip.
- Be direct. Confront the gossip and confidently tell him or her that such behavior is making it uncomfortable for you and other coworkers.
- Go to a supervisor/manager. Gossiping wastes the agencies time and hurts morale. A Directorate, Agency, or Battalion interested in a healthy work environment will value the opportunity to correct this type of situation.

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### What The Employer Can Do Part III

While regulating gossip can be very difficult, there are some things that employers can do to minimize negative gossiping and rumor mongering:

- Communicate regularly and consistently with employees. Regular communication minimizes the influence and need for gossip, because everyone is "in-the-know." A communication vacuum is a breeding ground for gossip.
- Discourage gossip in official company policy. Convey to your employees that such talk is injurious to morale and productivity and will not be tolerated.
- Nip it in the bud. If an employee comes to you complaining of gossip, or if you know an employee to be a gossiper, be proactive. Tell the offender that you are aware of his/her behavior. Describe how his behavior negatively impacts the workplace and request a new behavior.
- Incorporate employee driven group discussions and expectations about gossiping. This gives permission to coworkers to hold each other mutually accountable for having a "gossip-free" workplace.
- As a supervisor or manager—do not engage in gossip yourself. What is good for the goose is good for the gander.

Supervisor and Managers have the responsibility of creating an environment that is safe and healthy for all the employees. When an individual or individuals are allowed to create an environment that is not conducive to the workforce, those individuals need to be held accountable for their actions.