

NM ADR NEWS

Encouraging communication through mutual respect



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About the OADPR

The 2007 Governmental Dispute Prevention & Resolution Act (GDPRA) created the OADPR to promote early dispute resolution and positive collaboration among state employees and agencies through the development and support of effective and efficient programs and policies. The Office operates as a Bureau of the Risk Management Division (RMD) of the General Services Department (GSD).

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Gossip is the basis for more misunderstandings and conflicts than perhaps any other workplace behavior; the following article contains timeless and helpful information on how to combat negative gossip.

*"If you haven't got anything nice to say
about anybody, come sit next to me."*

~ Alice Roosevelt Longworth

REDUCING NEGATIVE WORKPLACE GOSSIP

Glancing up at the wall clock, Jamie, an occupational health nurse, realized that the morning had slipped away as a result of impromptu visits by employees wanting to discuss issues with coworkers. Jamie knew from experience that negative gossip produced negative outcomes, caused mental pain to unsuspecting coworkers, and amplified strained relationships or situations. Tired of escalating gossip, Jamie resolved to take a leadership role in reducing negative gossip at work.

Kurland and Pelled (2000) define workplace gossip as "... informal and evaluative talk in an organization . . . about another member of that organization who is not present" (p. 429). This neutral definition allows for positive workplace gossip (e.g., discussing recent professional accomplishments of a coworker within a context of praise or support). Positive gossip serves to disseminate morale-boosting information aimed at increasing camaraderie, and is generally not associated with negative outcomes. Negative gossip (e.g., discussing unfounded suspicions or

criticisms regarding coworkers' professional behaviors) damages professional reputations and could result in unfounded disciplinary measures. Although experts acknowledge that workplace gossip sometimes provides a forum for productive informal communication, allows stressed employees to vent, and provides opportunities for social bonding (Crampton, Hodge, & Mishra, 1998; Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Therrien, 2004), negative gossip can cause great stress and divisiveness (Galvin, 2004; Therrien, 2004). When situations arise in which negative gossip becomes the focus of interaction, interventions exist that have proven helpful in transforming harmful circumstances into opportunities for clarification and problem solving. The sidebar contains tips for reducing negative workplace gossip.

Negative gossip will always exist to some extent in the workplace. Issues surrounding the generation of gossip can be complex, but individual participation can be a simple matter. In 1932, businessman Herbert J. Taylor created four questions to assess office gossip that were adopted by Rotary International in 1943:

1. Is it the truth?
2. Is it fair to all concerned?
3. Will it build goodwill and better friendships?
4. Will it be beneficial to all concerned?

If the answer to any of these questions is "no," then do not participate and take measures to diffuse the gossip if possible. The approach is simple but can be extremely effective, even if enacted by only one individual.

Tips for Reducing Negative Workplace Gossip

- Set a personal example by not encouraging, listening to, or passing along gossip.
- Cultivate an honest and open work environment by discussing issues and concerns only when all involved parties are present.
- When negative gossip occurs, pay less attention to the gossip and more attention to the conditions under which it occurred (e.g., ambiguity and lack of formal communication around a workplace issue or concern tend to breed gossip). Clarifying underlying concerns and providing accurate information will diffuse negative gossip and place the focus where it belongs – on problem solving.
- Engage in open, straightforward, and productive discussion of organizational changes or problems.
- Keep lines of communication open by conducting timely meetings, using bulletin boards, providing regular performance feedback, addressing individual goals and objectives regularly, and promptly engaging in formal conflict resolution for dysfunctional conflict and rumors.
- Promptly and publicly correct misinformation regarding individuals or general workplace issues.
- Engage all levels of management and staff in enacting a zero tolerance policy for negative rumors and gossip. An institutional stance taken by all members at every level of an organization is necessary for success.

From Crampton, Hodge, & Mishra, 1998; and Therrien, 2004.

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