

Gossip – The Unkind Word

The notion of "workplace violence" usually points to the physical harm one inflicts on another. For me, there's another example of workplace violence that is just as, if not more, threatening and hurtful – workplace gossip.

I define gossip as any language that results in another's experiencing pain, suffering or confusion and is used when that "other," to whom it's directed, is not present.

Over the years, I've experienced hundreds of workplace situations where gossip was "business as usual" – part and parcel of the culture.

In a number of these instances, many individuals would say they were "against" gossip. Moreover, even those who have attended formal meetings to explore the "gossip issue," or after sensitivity training sessions intended to reduce the number of gossip incidents, or after organizational mandates that "no more gossiping is permitted," and even after folks "signed the pledge" to speak openly and directly to colleagues and co-workers to reduce the "gossip problem," a fair number of these "committed to change the culture" folks continued to engage in gossiping. Why do folks commit to "no gossip" yet continue to engage in gossiping.

Competing commitments

Gossip is an attack which is consciously or unconsciously fear-based. Sometimes one's commitment to not gossip is subsumed by their fear, anxiety or concern about who they might become if they stopped gossiping.

For example:

Who would I be then?

What would I do then (instead of gossiping)?

Would I no longer be "one of the guys/gals?" (the odd one out)

Would anyone still have lunch with me?

Would I lose my friends?

Would folks ostracize me as "spiritual" or some other (in their perspective) pejorative?

These are often folks who have a disproportionate need to be seen, acknowledge, liked, wanted or accepted, who need others to feel comfortable around them, and so acquiesce when approached to gossip. Why?

Gossip – not always negative

Sometimes gossip takes the form of neutral, even positive, comments used to just create conversation about the life, work, or activities of another – but, outside the presence of that other.

Gossiping is a protective mechanism

Stopping one's self from talking about others can be very challenging, even painful. Why?

Many folks have great difficulty being open, authentic and real, or allowing their vulnerability. So, as a defense mechanism, gossiping supports them to take the focus off themselves. Rather than showing up as their true and real self (warts and all) the practice of gossiping protects them from having to disclose their own feelings and emotions, from having to "open up" to others.

Gossiping then becomes their way of not having to reveal anything about themselves. Most gossipers have lived life behind a mask, putting on false identities when they get dressed to face the world, always needing to protect themselves from allowing their authenticity. They feel frightened and threatened.

Do no harm

The commitment to not gossip is not a mental or intellectual choice alone. To show up as real, authentic and sincere requires an inner intention that emanates from one's inner sense of integrity and deep desire to be harmless as they live their life in relationship – at work, at home, and at play.

Lacking this deep commitment to "doing no harm," and to "stop gossiping" often falls short when one perceives it as a policy or principle imposed from without. This is often the reason (excuse) for example, that gossipers often fall off the gossip wagon. A simple mental choice, absent a deeper, abiding and heart-felt commitment, is not sustainable – as is also reflected with other addictions. It's not simply a mind-over-matter equation.

So, at the end of the day (and throughout the day!), the commitment not to gossip often dissipates rather quickly over time.

Or, someone may be "upholding the rule" outwardly, but still be gossiping in their thoughts, still sending out hostile vibrations, and just being "quiet" about it. Often, this covert behavior is even more dangerous and insidious.

It's an inside-out proposition

Unless we truly aware of the nature of our perceptions, our orientation to the world and the people in, the nature of our judgments of others, and the underlying nature of our emotions and feelings, we'll be challenged to resist the urge to gossip.

We can stop gossiping, but usually only when and if an inner desire arises from a deep sense of integrity and authenticity, and a conscious desire and choice to be harmless in our interactions with others.

To free ourselves from the pernicious and insidious effects of gossiping and to free ourselves from inflicting harm upon others, we need to explore and heal the split between our outer and inner self. Only then can we live honest, sincere and self-responsible lives – gossip free - at work, at home and at play.

Some questions for self-reflection:

Why do I engage in gossiping or supporting others who do?

What does gossiping get me?

Is there another way to get this same result without harming another?

Does gossiping align with my personal values around respecting and honoring others?

Would I repeat gossip I hear or create directly to the person it's about?

Would I want to be quoted on TV or in the papers or in the company newsletter?

Would I encourage my children to engage in gossiping?

Would I engage in gossiping if it were about a relative or personal friend?

Am I expressing my authenticity, sincerity, and integrity when I gossip?

Do I feel ethical when I'm gossiping?

What was my experience around gossip when I was growing up?

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