

Gossip – A Form of Workplace Violence (II)

Today there's an ever-increasing emphasis on gossip, which is played out in any number of Reality TV shows, in celebrity gossip shows and in the print media (e.g., The National Enquirer sells more than 3 million copies each week).

In company offices, in meetings, on the phone, in emails, in social settings and around the water cooler, people are spending more time talking about someone else – in language that is most often harmful, hurtful, critical, demeaning, and judgmental – and outside the presence of the one who is the subject of the conversation.

In the past, we might have viewed workplace gossip as playful, “idle”, and “just kidding”. Gossip today has taken on a tone of abuse, a tone of violence. Gossip, in fact, is a form of personal attack.

Gossip is an emotional cancer in the workplace that eats away at the sense of well-being of the individual and the team.

One hallmark of a true “team” is shared values —including mutual honesty, trust and respect. Where gossip rears its ugly head, these shared values are nonexistent. When gossip exists, there can be no “team”. The label “team” is meaningless. At best, there is but a “group.”

Contrary to popular opinion, gossip is not benign; it's not idle; it's not tame; it's not "for the fun of it". It's certainly not entertainment.

Gossip, moreover, is not a problem; it is a symptom — indicating a lack of well-being in one's own mind-body-emotion-spirit integration. A workplace culture and environment where gossip flourishes indicates a lack of well-being in the body of the organization.

Gossip is a very real pernicious and insidious form of workplace violence.

The word “violence” is a strong word — commonly associated with physical aggression.

The Random House Dictionary of English points to "violence of speech and distortion." While we may consider the way we talk as not being violent, in fact, our words in the context of gossip often lead to hurt, pain and suffering.

Gossip is any language that is most often harmful, hurtful, critical, demeaning and judgmental — and outside the presence of the one who is the subject or target of the conversation.

Gandhi used the term “nonviolence” as it refers to our natural state of being loving and compassionate — when there is no violence in our heart or in our mind. Gossip is not present, or possible, when we're in our natural state of acceptance, compassion and tolerance.

It's critical to explore not only the symptom, but also the root cause of this particular aspect of workplace violence.

And, to discover root causes, it's well to begin with a powerful question: "Why do I choose to gossip?"

Answering this question requires curiosity about our history around gossip. If gossiping is part of our character and personality now, there's a good chance that we were conditioned to gossip, and gossiping has become part of our wiring which we bring to our workplace.

Three questions can support us to explore our history around gossiping and reflect on our past and present need to gossip:

1. What's my experience as the one who is gossiping?
2. What's my experience been as the one who has been the target of gossip?
3. On a scale of 1-10, to what degree does gossiping take up a greater part of my time and energy?

Honest and responsible responses to these questions can point to insights about our personal relationship with gossip and about habits and instincts we may have to gossip.

A second approach to exploring the "Why do I gossip?" question is to look at what gossip gets us — in other words, what our motivations for gossiping are.

"Why am I willing (consciously or unconsciously) to cause another person harm, hurt, upset, or pain?" — the WIIFM ("What's in it for me?") question.

Since no one is born gossiping, how is it that some of us develop into individuals who have a desire, need or obsession to engage in a such a violent or toxic behavior?

The short answer is that each of us grows up with three basic psycho-social needs: the need for control, security and recognition.

Because many of us feel we're not in control of our lives, or feel we're not receiving adequate attention, acknowledgment and recognition, or feel insecure within ourselves, we look outside our self for ways to "feel good" and to "feel better" about life and about our world. There are many ways to meet these three needs, one of the most blatant and egregious of which is through gossiping.

In other words, by preoccupying ourselves with the life, or activities of another person, by being critical of them, by being judgmental of them, by being dishonest about them, by betraying them, and by putting them down, through the act of gossip, we feel we are lifting ourselves up. We engage in gossip to avoid personal responsibility for our feelings of frustration, irritation and anger by acting out through gossip and focusing our personal discontent on another.

So, when we are experiencing feelings being a "nobody" and have a need to feel like a "somebody," we often believe we can gain some sense of control, recognition, approval or security by gossiping.

By asking ourselves, with honesty, sincerity and self-responsibility: "Why do I really gossip?" and "What does gossip get me?" we can explore root causes of why we gossip, why we choose to allow the violence of gossip to permeate our workplace behavior and why we gossip in an attempt to feel good about ourselves in some conscious or unconscious way at the expense of harming another.

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Peter G. Vajda, Ph.D, C.P.C. is the founder of True North Partnering an Atlanta-based company that supports conscious living through coaching and facilitating. With a practice based on the dynamic intersection of mind, body, emotion and spirit, Peter's approach focuses on personal, business, relational and spiritual coaching. He is a professional speaker and published author. For more information, www.truenorthpartnering.com, or [pvajda\(at\)truenorthpartnering.com](mailto:pvajda@truenorthpartnering.com), or phone 770.804.9125. You can also follow Peter on Twitter: @petergvajda