

July 6, 2015 3:30 pm

How rumour and gossip oil the wheels of office life

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Back-channel chatter can have helpful and harmful consequences, writes psychotherapist Naomi Shragai



When managers withhold information, other narratives fill the void

Gossip and rumour are part of the fabric of working life — they entertain, inform and connect people, but they can also ruin reputations, destroy trust, create bad attitudes and even reduce productivity.

What distinguishes the helpful consequences from the harmful is the intention behind what is said, how the information is perceived and acted on, and the length of time it is allowed to spread and fester.

As well as providing informal communication networks, gossip

and rumour act as psychological spaces for perceived unfairness and power imbalances, or emotions such as jealousy, resentment, boredom and even hatred. When one cannot confront an issue or person directly, chats with colleagues become a way of offloading frustrations.

People's anxieties heighten at times of change and uncertainty, such as when an organisation restructures, changes leadership or undertakes a merger or acquisition. Such situations lead people to worry about how they will be affected. Who will be promoted or demoted, whose job will disappear or be changed, and who will be paid what?

In the absence of adequate information from management, people naturally create narratives to fill the void. The longer executives take to make decisions, the more anxious people become and the more rumours fill the vacuum and make sense of the uncertainty.

Nicholas DiFonzo, professor of psychology at Rochester Institute of Technology and co-author of *Rumor Psychology*, says: "The common denominator seems to be fear — we're afraid of what this person in the organisation will do to us; we're afraid of how [the] engineering [department] is going to get more money and we in marketing are going to get less money; we're afraid of what this rival company is doing — and so we spread rumours about them."

Spreading negative rumours can make us feel better in the short term, but means we are less likely to take responsibility for either our predicament or obtaining the information we need from the powers that be.

Professor DiFonzo nevertheless believes organisations could not survive without informal information spread by word of mouth. "There's a wealth of information that is not in the procedural manual and nobody is going to write it down," he says.

"It's the kind of information you have to hear through the grapevine: what the organisational norms are, who you should approach and who you should not approach, and who gets paid what, the kind of information that is often secret."

Studies have shown that while rumours reduce trust in management and harm the attitudes of staff, they do not necessarily affect productivity.

Prof DiFonzo explains: "If I hear rumours about my company being downsized and [the] management won't talk to me, there's a great deal of uncertainty. I may feel worse about [the] management, I may trust them less, but I may work harder so that if there is a downsizing I will be retained."

A senior executive of a large UK technology company, however, found that rumours left unchecked affected sales when disparaging stories spread about a product, resulting in staff being reluctant to sell it.

“When rumours spread across the sales teams that a product doesn’t work or is difficult to implement, there may be an element of truth in them. But often the rumour is exaggerated and means that no one wants to deal with it . . . and so sales decrease.”

Although rumour often holds some truth, people’s interpretation of events tends to avoid complexity and personal responsibility, and is often directed towards an individual, a department or an outside rival.

Mannie Sher, director of the group relations programme at the Tavistock Institute and adviser to companies and organisations, believes rumour is often a larger systemic phenomenon that often targets an individual.

He says: “Rumours are about ‘an individual who acted badly’ because individualising a systemic problem is easier than to say to an organisation, ‘we have a problem which as a team we have to resolve’. Very often the route taken is to identify an individual who may have acted badly, and for the group to use him to project the group’s incompetence. We can say the CEO is a control freak and it’s because of him that we’re in this mess.”

Gossip, as opposed to rumour, is often about social networking and bonding and can be entertaining, irresistible and even witty. Because it is so pleasurable, people tend not to consider the harm it causes. Although positive gossip occurs, it is the negative gossip most people enjoy more because it makes us feel better about ourselves and reassures us, because we are not the subject of it.

There are many motives for malicious gossip. Projecting our own feelings of inadequacy on others by putting them down rids us of our bad feelings and makes us feel superior. Gossip allows us to retaliate against perceived unfairness, act out passive-aggressive and envious feelings and redress power imbalances. People revert to gossip when they believe they cannot confront an issue directly.

There is cachet to be gained from it. The office gossip gains influence as he or she collects valuable information while also creating a wealth of contacts. “In” and “out” groups then form around those “in the know” and those not.

A woman who came to me for psychotherapy related how a colleague who was also a friend denied she was having an affair with the boss despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. The betrayal she felt was aggravated by feelings of unfairness, powerlessness and distrust because of privileges her colleague was enjoying as a result.

Because she could not confront either party directly, she joined in the office gossip to clear her confusion, but primarily to have an outlet for her feelings.

“I had my head messed up when she told me it wasn’t happening and I wanted to know what

evidence people had, which was pretty compelling,” she says. “When it’s the boss, it is not bad behaviour that you can confront.” Joining in the gossip eventually left her feeling even worse when she was verbally attacked for spreading the news by a colleague who did not believe it.

There is a positive element to gossip, though. It acts as a safety valve for grievances, allowing pent-up feelings to be released in a way that minimises potential damage. Rushing to a quiet corner with a colleague for a whispered rant is preferable to a flare-up with your boss.

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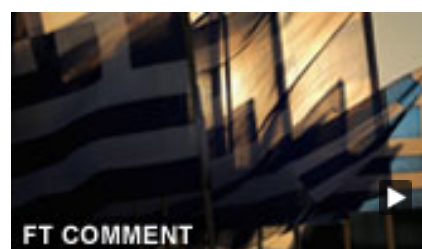
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