



### Dealing with an Office Gossip

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a gossip as “*a person who habitually reveals personal or sensational facts about others*”. Gossips often use stories or information about others as a method to gain power in interpersonal circles. They think that if they are always in the “know” then there is a good likelihood that others will seek them out for additional information. Another motive for the gossip is to use the manipulation of information to get situations “stirred up” and enjoy watching the show. This gives the gossip a sense of power and influence that they have not been legitimately been granted. Consider the gossips you know...aren't they often people without real power in your community or workplace?

This behaviour can be very destructive, not just to the individual who is the target, but also to the organization or community as a whole. It serves to confuse not clarify; to hurt not help. Because gossip typically involves rumour and inference rather than public fact it is difficult to refute or undo. Try the following:

- The best way to deal with a gossip is by not engaging in the gossip process yourself. You need to stand up to the gossip directly. Let the person know that you are not interested in these kinds of conversations about another person. Stop the chain.
- If the gossip is offering vague inferences or rumours, then insist he or she clarify and provide concrete, specific information that can be confirmed. Typically, this expectation for accountability will make them uncomfortable and they will stop. They will recognize that you rely on shared and relevant facts, not incidental slander.
- If you discover you are the victim of a gossip, it is best deal with them directly. Inform the person what you understand that they have been saying about you. Tell them that any information about you is yours to share and that you find gossiping to be dishonest and disrespectful. Avoid becoming aggressive or defensive, and do not feel obliged to provide any details or clarification about the information being spread.
- Finally, try your best to reinforce the gossip for legitimate actions at work. Pat him or her on the back for work related actions that deserve appropriate recognition, as this will enable the gossip to find value and power in a real sense. Over time they will learn the kind of behaviour and interaction that are accepted by you and others.

It is likely that others feel as you do, but they may be afraid to speak their mind as they think the gossip may turn on them. They need to know that if you are being firm with the gossip that it will give them confidence to do the same. Your behaviour will enhance your reputation and help set an emotional and ethical climate at work. A plant can only grow in the right conditions – the right soil, the right light. Your actions determine if the gossip “grows” in your workplace. You determine whether the gossip has the right conditions. If you and your co-workers allow the gossip to continue without addressing it, you have contributed to its growth.