Restrain Workplace Gossip

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Cyber-gossip is the newest innovation in an ancient practice. Notwithstanding this new-and-improved medium for gossip, E-mail, the destructive effects remain the same. One now-former employee of a firm bears personal witness to this.

Linda says her stomach still churns when she thinks back to her early days on E-mail. One fateful workday, rather than gossiping in quarters where she could be overheard, Linda took advantage of the then-novel computer technology to send a quick message to a peer in her department. The note was essentially a lambasting of a supervisor named Mark, affectionately referred to in the message as "Marky-poo," among other things.

When completed, Linda cheerfully and covertly sent her critique. Problem was, as a relatively inexperienced user, she sent the message not to her colleague, but to Mark himself! Ouch.

Gossip can be defined as discrediting talk about someone who is not present. And if it pervaded the workplace before, the widespread use of E-mail for exchanging information-its use as a "virtual watercooler"-has only served to exacerbate the practice. Rumours, innuendo, and other juicy tidbits can crisscross the office and the world today at E-speed, often leaving no one the wiser. One can even seem to be working diligently at a terminal when, in reality, one is merely working the rumor mill.

Of course, the "meet me at the photocopier" approach has not become obsolete-and it likely never will since people can't seem to help but talk about others. Typical of the survey results on the prevalence of gossip is the finding by the American Society for Training and Development that 21 percent of people say they are "frequent participants" in workplace gossip, and 64 percent say they gossip at work "sometimes." The research concluded that gossip is often work-related, usually centering on business changes, office intrigue, and people's private lives. If the statistics were not disheartening enough, there's also the glowing assessment of gossip by the "experts." Scholars from the fields of psychology, sociology, anthropology, and even philosophy tell us that workplace gossip is beneficial because of its ability to "bond" individuals together. According to one psychology professor at Temple University: "If people aren't talking about other people, it's a signal that something is wrong-that we feel socially alienated or indifferent."

The academics' seeming commendation of gossip is seconded by the news media. Newspapers and magazines regularly portray gossip as having a gainful dimension to it. Consider the following headlines:

"Pssst: Office Gossip Can Be a Productive Tool" (Indianapolis Business Journal)

"Listen Up! Gossip Can Be Good; Gossip, Experts Say, Is Simply an Act of Spreading Information" (Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel)

"Profit from Gossip" (The Times of London)

"In Praise of Office Gossip" (Fortune)

In spite of these pronouncements, the truth remains: Workplace gossip fuels conflict, disruption, underperformance, and turnover. And what makes the secular commentary even more baneful is that it couldn't be more antithetical to the scriptural teaching on this subject. Both the Old and New Testaments clearly reject secular notions about gossip, and the counsel to eschew gossip appears most prominently in the Book of Proverbs.

PROVERBS ON GOSSIP

In our contemporary setting, one could surely ask in good faith: "What's the big deal here? Everybody gossips and usually there's no malicious intent behind the words. We in business should just lighten up and focus on matters of genuine consequence."

A legitimate contention, perhaps? Try telling that to the apostle Paul, who set the sin of gossip alongside some pretty extreme company. To the Romans, he wrote about some in their community: "They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful" (Romans 1:29-30). And to the Corinthians, he similarly wrote: I fear that [when I see you] there may be quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder" (2 Corinthians 12:20b). The inclusion of gossip in such lists may appear to be grievously misplaced in a present day culture that renders gossip at worst a tepid sin. But God views it differently. It is not by accident that His inspired messenger to the Gentiles numbered gossip with these flagrant transgressions. Gossip is a venomous misuse of the tongue, induced by its scriptural companions arrogance, jealousy, insolence, and the like. Gossip is a manifestation of those negative attitudes and a vehicle by which our underlying problems create strife.

Whereas this linkage to strife may be only implied by Paul, it is made explicit in Proverbs:

Without wood a fire goes out; without gossip a quarrel dies down. (Proverbs 26:20)

Strife feeds on gossip as fire feeds on wood, according to the proverb. A remedy for conflict, then, is to starve the fire by minimizing gossip. Among the many possibilities to execute this teaching, Proverbs highlights one in particular: Do not associate with gossips. Proverbs 20:19 teaches that:

A gossip betrays a confidence; so avoid a man who talks too much.

We find very little ambiguity or wiggle room here. The verse tells us not to encumber ourselves with people who gossip. We are to deliberately avoid" them. And in extreme cases, it would seem, we are called to remove them from our organizations.

The apostle John lends further support to this somewhat controversial position. In his third epistle, he wrote to praise a man named Gaius who provided hospitality and

support for brothers in the faith. In doing so, John took the occasion to also alert the community about the problematic tolerance of their church boss, Diotrephes. Apparently, Diotrephes, a man "who loves to be first" (note the connection to arrogance), had been "gossiping maliciously" about John and had furthermore been kicking good people out of the church (3 John 9-10). In the letter, John promised to personally remedy the situation when he arrived. Here, arrogance led to gossip, which led to a strife that was impairing effective witness and growth. To break the chain, John indicated, Diotrephes the gossip must be silenced or jettisoned.

Applying all of this to a contemporary business setting, the Scriptures teach not only that gossiping is a sin and that unchecked gossip creates conflict, but also that it is entirely appropriate to restrain workplace gossip through policy. It is to the implementation of this thorny issue that we now turn.

CRAFTING A REASONABLE POLICY

Several business management journals have in recent years urged employers to regulate workplace gossip.5 However, any time one promulgates rules that constrain employees from engaging in what they might consider to be natural or innocuous behaviours, one must do so with two eyes focused squarely on the reasonableness index. Such a task cannot be undertaken in a cavalier manner, since overregulation can be as fruitless as no regulation at all.

Case in point: the no-gossip policy for employees of the City of Baton Rouge. Here a policy regulating the speech of city employees blossomed to prohibit the telling of any joke that could possibly be construed by someone as sexist or racist. That is, any joke that gave offense to any person could bring the offending employee up for censure or worse. Later, the city council recognized that, although the latter part of the policy was well-intended, there were inherent problems with proscribing joke telling.

The trick, then, is to craft a no-gossip policy that honours God without unduly suffocating employee interaction. It must meet organizational interests of extinguishing rumour and encouraging respect, while simultaneously treating adults as adults. One way to perform this balancing act is by (1) narrowly tailoring the policy to deal only with gossip and (2) focusing the policy more on education about the problem than on punishment. The former prevents the policy from evolving into the untenable (as in Baton Rouge), while the latter maximizes the chance that it will be effective.

The educational dimension, it seems, is especially important because the average person in the workplace has never really thought about gossip being detrimental to morale, teamwork, or productivity. Quite the opposite, people tend to view it as a normal and even healthy activity that somehow makes them feel good. Therefore, to get any employee to buy in to the policy, one must encourage employees to see what management sees-that gossip leads to strife, and strife undermines the quality of the work environment. Whatever the vehicle one chooses for announcing one's no-gossip policy (office memo, formal brochure, agenda item in a meeting, etc.), education about this rationale should be the centerpiece of the communique.

One might then consider following up this initial education about gossip by again raising to the surface (during, say, performance reviews, mentoring sessions, or training) the negative effects of disparaging talk about others. As with any new policy, "continuing education" about the policy's purpose and its parameters will be necessary for it to gain a real foothold in a work group. Additionally, a manager can facilitate such education by providing information about how an employee can personally extinguish workplace gossip when it arises. Both Christian resources and the empirical literature offer useful tips on how to diplomatically steer conversations away from gossip.

Of course, the no-gossip policy cannot be exclusively educational since a law without teeth is no law at all. There must be some established consequence for violation of the policy. Common sense should be one's guide here; penalties must fit the crime, and, most importantly, a manager should remain mindful of the principles of due process described in the next chapter. However, remembering the warning in Proverbs 20:19 "to avoid a [gossip] , management should be sure that the policy underscores that severe and repeated violations of the no-gossip policy are cause for dismissal.

As the policy matures though, self-enforcement may prevail in lieu of the more severe tactics. That is, by raising consciousness about this issue, by focusing on education about the effects of workplace gossip, and by offering regular reminders that management is indeed serious about this issue, one can gently shape a workplace culture so a stigma is associated with gossiping. Just as it has become socially unacceptable to use vile language or to dress suggestively in some workplaces, it can become similarly unacceptable to make derogatory remarks about others. Herein lies the long-term ideal for any no-gossip policy. If narrowly tailored and educationally oriented, after years of its operation it may become institutionalized as part of the corporate culture.

TREATING THE SYMPTOMS ONLY

When people are exposed to one another for prolonged periods of time, there is a vast potential for some to develop a distaste for others in the group. And often this distaste will manifest itself as gossip. It is important to recognize, therefore, that a no-gossip policy will treat only symptoms of broader problems like disrespect, envy, vengeance, and arrogance. It will not (nor should it attempt to) change people's attitudes toward one another. Personnel policy is insufficient for this larger task.

What the policy can do for an organization, though, is to help starve the fire of conflict by depriving it of some wood. And it's not that radical or novel a concept. Hallmark, for instance, includes gossip as one of the "inappropriate uses" in its E-mail policy and American Express has a hot line in place to drain gossip about workplace policies. To reduce the effect of corporate rumours and gossip, American Express employees are encouraged to anonymously call at any time to get reliable answers to their questions.

There is, however, one irony in promoting a no-gossip policy for which the Christian manager should be prepared: The policy's initial effect may be to increase gossip.

That is, this unorthodox approach to employee management may simply give workers one more thing to gossip about and, even more disturbingly, the manager whose name is on the memo may be the target of choice for some time to come!

But this is part of the price paid by Christians when we advance Bible-based ideas that perplex the world. Scripture tells us that the workplace grapevine-like every gossip medium-is often a poison grapevine. Therefore, though others may question or criticize us, we should remember when we administer an antidote that it is another way we honor God and those He has placed under our care.