

When Gossip Strikes

By

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You know at once when it happens. Conversations stop when you enter the room. People stare. Rumors reach your desk. The office gossip has struck, and you're the target.

It can be a coworker jealous of your promotion, a friend who feels like you've stolen her thunder, or just an insecure fellow administrative professional who thinks he's going to get ahead by stomping you down.

Jill Clare^{*}, a former administrative assistant at an upscale retailer, remembers the time when she walked into the restroom and two coworkers stopped talking. "It was like a gate crashed down," Clare said. "I found out later that one of the girls said I was in the vice president's hotel room during a business trip. The rumor was that I'd slept with him. What really happened is that it was late at night, and we'd just gotten back from a business dinner, and he had files I needed for an 8 a.m. meeting. He handed them to me at the door and we said goodnight. That was it. I never set foot in his room. One of our coworkers made the incident sound like a torrid love affair. It's miserable to be the subject of gossip."

Mary Gormandy White M.A., SPHR, author *101 Human Resource Management Tips* and Training Coordinator for Mobile Technical Institute, often coaches employees on how to handle such uncomfortable situations. She advises administrative professionals

^{*} Name changed upon request.

to recognize gossip by the following signs. "If people who are animated become silent or begin looking uncomfortable the moment you – or a member of management – walks into the room, there's a good chance that they were engaged in inappropriate conversation about someone in the office," said White.

Unfortunately, such occurrences are common. Not only does such an atmosphere make employees miserable, it saps productivity, since valuable time and effort is wasted in whispered conversations instead of about important projects. While some workplaces seem to be hotbeds of gossip, administrative professionals can take control of the situation with grace, dignity and professionalism.

If you're the subject of conversation behind the water cooler, these five tips can help you handle the situation with aplomb.

- 1. Rise above it.** While your first instinct may be to confront the gossipmonger or seek revenge by starting your own rumor mill, fight the urge and rise above it. "There's no benefit to getting revenge by starting rumors of your own or saying nasty things about the people who are spreading rumors about you," states White.
- 2. Understand what causes such behavior.** While we're not making excuses for the troublemakers, understanding what fuels the gossip fire can help you smother it before it turns into a conflagration. Most gossipers are bored and unhappy. They focus on juicy tidbits, real or imagined, to liven up the day. If you're in a position to do so, encourage people in the office who are prone to gossip to participate in creative projects. Give them an outlet for their energies and focus them on something positive. While you can't change their inner makeup or

personality, the saying "idle hands are the Devil's workshop" comes to mind; if they've got time on their hands, they'll while it away causing trouble, so see if you can't keep their minds on a work related problem.

- 3. Never participate in gossip.** When you're the subject of wagging tongues, gossip is a misery. When you've got juicy goods on the gal you can't stand down in accounting, it's a thrill ride. To avoid being the subject of gossip, avoid participating in it in the first place. Break the cycles of the office rumor mill by never participating in gab sessions that focus on personal gossip.
- 4. Wait to see if the problem goes away.** Sometimes if you refuse to participate in gossip, it sputters out and dies away on its own. Time can often smooth over a trouble period of gossip.
- 5. If not, gather facts and seek help.** When coworkers seemed to avoid her and it interfered with her work, Jill Clare sought help from her company's human resources manager to calm the situation. If perpetual gossip is making it impossible to get work done, it's time to seek help. Gather facts before approaching your supervisor or your company's human resources department. Begin to take notes on the day, time and participants in hurtful gossip sessions and bring notes to your meeting. Depending on the situation, your manager or the human resources department may coach you on how you can handle the situation or they may intervene to put a stop to it.

Whatever you do, stay calm and professional. "Remember that the way you conduct yourself in the office has an impact on whether or not you will be considered for

promotions," White said. "By choosing to be the better person in the situation and rising above the pettiness that sometimes runs rampant in office environments, you will be sending a message to management that you just might be management material."