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The Silent Killer: How Workplace Gossip Erodes Teams and Why Managers Must Act

Throughout my years working with different teams, one common theme that has surfaced in discussions with colleagues is the power of communication—both positive and negative. What I've observed firsthand is how innocent office chatter can quickly evolve into something far more destructive. Workplace gossip is often brushed off as harmless—a mere byproduct of human nature—but when left unchecked, it becomes a toxic force that undermines team cohesion and, ultimately, productivity. As managers, we must recognize the subtle yet potent threat gossip poses and act swiftly to prevent its spread before it causes irreparable damage.

At its core, gossip thrives in environments where communication is unclear, frustrations are ignored, and transparency is lacking. While

leagues—or worse, their manager—the isolation and stress can lead to burnout, loss of passion for the job, or even resignations. These are not abstract issues; they are real, human struggles that affect employees' mental and emotional well-being.

Case Study: Cost of Gossip in a High-Profile Mail Project

Take the case of Joseph, a seasoned leader who had previously managed the IT department with great success. His expertise in technology and systems management made him an ideal candidate to lead the high-profile “Project Consolidation,” a major mail management initiative. However, what began as innocent office chatter about Joseph new leadership role quickly spiraled into a full-blown rumor mill. Doubts about his qualifications—particularly his lack of experience in mail management—began circulating, undermining his authority and sowing division within his team.

The emotional toll on Joseph was profound. Despite his proven leadership in IT, he found himself increasingly isolated and facing diminishing support from his colleagues. The whispers about his capabilities left him questioning his own value within the team. His declining morale was evident in his performance reviews, and the constant stress of managing a project under these conditions took a significant emotional toll. After just six months of trying to navigate the toxic environment, Joseph resigned.

Despite the project's high potential, it was severely impacted by poor collaboration and missed deadlines. What could have been a successful consolidation effort instead became a cautionary tale of how unchecked gossip can undermine leadership, erode trust, and ultimately cost the company valuable talent and missed opportunities. This case is a stark reminder that even the

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casual conversations can build camaraderie, they can also morph into gossip, fostering division. Misunderstandings turn into rumors, and rumors breed animosity. It's easy to see how quickly a healthy, collaborative team can fracture, with cliques forming and trust deteriorating. Research shows that workplaces plagued by gossip see higher absenteeism, lower job satisfaction, and strained relationships with leadership.

Gossip often starts small—whispers in the breakroom—but its ripple effect is far-reaching. What may seem like a minor distraction quickly becomes a source of widespread negativity, spreading like wildfire throughout the workplace. As managers, it's tempting to dismiss it as harmless chatter, but the reality is that gossip acts as a silent poison, eroding morale, motivation, and productivity.

The most damaging aspect of gossip is the emotional toll it takes on employees. It breeds insecurity. When whispers about someone's performance or intentions circulate, the emotional impact can be severe. Employees may feel their every move is scrutinized, their trust broken, and their value diminished within the team.

Imagine the anxiety someone might feel being caught in the crossfire of a rumor. If they feel they can no longer trust col-

Implementing High-Volume Accessible Document Automation

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seconds instead of days or weeks. Another significant advantage of automation is the ability to receive PDFs built from multiple systems and make a document accessible on the fly. Having this capability can significantly reduce document archiving costs, which, in some instances, can be more than 30 times higher when stored in accessible formats.

Additionally, an automated approach can be easily modified to support evolving industry standards, as templates or rules can be updated to support the new versions. On the other hand, if documents were created or stored using older guidelines, they all may have to be updated individually to support the new standard, which can be cost prohibitive.

There are many tools and resources available to aid organizations in delivering accessible documents. Selecting the appropriate solution hinges on understanding the essential features required. Here are some fundamental requirements:

- Ensure the solution supports various accessible formats, including print/mail, digital and alternate formats.
- Consider future needs and document volume, delivering scalability.
- Confirm that the solution integrates with existing workflows and document management systems to minimize disruption.
- Consider a solution which provides automatic accessibility validation to ensure compliance.
- Verify compliance with digital accessibility standards such as WCAG, PDF/UA and/or Health and Human Services (HHS).
- Consider a single, robust solution capable of delivering all your document accessibility needs, rather than numerous point solutions.
- As language regulations evolve (as with the recent CMS Final Rule), seek a solution that delivers document accessibility alongside automated language translations.

While an initial investment in a solution is necessary, once automation systems are in place, a company can look forward to a significant reduction in long-term labor costs associated with manual remediation of documents, greater accuracy and meeting accessibility requirements more cost-effectively.

Ultimately, It's Just Good Business

Having the ability to produce accessible documents goes beyond increased efficiency, easier management of large mailing volumes and adherence to standard regulations. The paramount goal is to ensure documents not only are compliant but are also usable, facilitating easy navigation and information absorption for customers and employees. Accessible documents are vital for creating a truly inclusive society. Prioritizing accessibility as a business ensures that everyone, regardless of ability, has equal access to critical information, ultimately driving engagement and trust. Achieving accessibility is about breaking down communication barriers for an exceptional customer experience for all.

(About the author: A digital document industry pioneer, Ernie Crawford is one of only a small number of people worldwide with M-EDP (Master Electronic Document Professional) designation. He has more than 30 years of management experience in the high-volume digital printing market.)

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most qualified individuals can be derailed by the damaging effects of workplace gossip.

The Role of the Manager

As a manager, your response to gossip is more important than you might realize. Silence is not neutrality—it's tacit approval. When managers allow gossip to persist without intervention, they indirectly send the message that such behavior is acceptable. This is especially problematic when high-performing individuals engage in gossip, as their actions may go unchecked, signaling to others that they, too, can participate without consequence.

Failure to address gossip damages a manager's credibility. It sends a message that leadership is weak, certain employees are above reproach, and harmful behaviors are tolerated. This undermines team morale and fosters an atmosphere of distrust and division. Addressing gossip is not just about correcting a small issue; it's about setting the tone and demonstrating that toxic behaviors will not be allowed to flourish.

But the emotional impact of ignoring gossip is just as damaging. When employees feel that leadership doesn't care about their emotional well-being, trust in the workplace erodes. The harm goes beyond performance metrics—it affects the core of what makes teams work: mutual respect and empathy.

The Cost of Ignoring Gossip

Neglecting to address workplace gossip affects more than just morale; it directly impacts productivity. When employees focus more on rumors than their work, their performance naturally suffers. Consider the frustration of a team member whose hard work is overshadowed by petty rumors. It's disheartening to feel that your contributions are undervalued or that your efforts are being undermined by invisible negativity.

Moreover, gossip destroys psychological safety, a crucial foundation for any productive team. Without this safety, employees are less likely to contribute innovative ideas, raise concerns, or work collaboratively. When employees feel they are in a hostile environment, they retreat, disengage, and withdraw from tasks they once enjoyed. Over time, talented individuals will seek healthier work environments, leaving behind those who are disengaged and disillusioned. This deepens the cycle of negativity and dysfunction.

Think about the toll this cycle takes on an individual: the uncertainty of being judged or misunderstood, the stress of walking on eggshells, and the sadness of watching a thriving team fragment into factions. These experiences can leave lasting emotional scars.

How to Address Workplace Gossip Effectively

1. Foster a Transparent Culture Promote open and honest communication as the norm. Encourage employees to address concerns directly with the appropriate channels, rather than venting through gossip. Transparency fosters trust and helps prevent misunderstandings from escalating.

2. Lead by Example Your actions as a manager speak louder than any policy. Demonstrate professionalism, discretion, and fairness in all interactions. By modeling the behavior you expect from your team, you set the standard for workplace conduct.

3. Address Issues Head-On When gossip arises—especially about key employees—don't ignore it. Have private, direct conversations with those involved, reminding them of the importance of teamwork. Addressing the issue early prevents negativity from spreading.

4. Encourage Conflict Resolution Provide employees with constructive ways to resolve conflicts, whether through mediation, anonymous reporting systems, or open forums. Employees should feel empowered to resolve issues healthily. Conflict is inevitable, but how it's managed defines the strength of the team.

5. Implement Consequences If gossip crosses into harmful territory, managers must take action. No employee, regardless of role or tenure, should be exempt from accountability. Enforcing consequences reinforces the expectation of respect and professionalism.

The Bottom Line

Workplace gossip is a silent killer that quietly erodes team cohesion and productivity. But its effects go beyond numbers—it damages the very heart of the organization, creating emotional scars that persist long after the gossip fades. As managers, it's our responsibility to act before gossip festers. By fostering a culture of transparency, fairness, and accountability, we can prevent gossip from taking root and ensure our teams thrive in a supportive, collaborative environment.

I've seen the transformation that occurs when managers take a strong stance against gossip. By cultivating a culture that values respect and teamwork, we not only improve morale and productivity but also create a space where employees feel safe and valued. The effort may be challenging, but the results—in terms of team unity, emotional health, and business outcomes—are worth it.

Is Your Team High Performing or Hardly Performing?

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One tool we can use to help build a sense of achievement is to participatively set and work together to achieve SMART goals. SMART goals are team goals that have these characteristics:

- Specific
- Measurable
- Ambitious yet achievable
- Results oriented
- Time specific

Communicating progress and celebrating progress on goals will help develop a powerful sense of achievement within our team. Remember the principles that "success breeds success", and "celebrating small wins leads to bigger wins".

5. Sense of Camaraderie

Benjamin Franklin said, "We must indeed all hang together, or most assuredly, we shall all hang separately." HPTs are characterized by a sense of camaraderie – having warm, positive, and cooperative relations with others in the workplace ("one for all and all for one"). Setting and working together to achieve SMART goals helps build camaraderie. In addition, try having periodic fun and team building activities. Here's a list to get you thinking:

1) Take your team to a movie (the large screen IMAX movies are great – even better if in 3D!).

2) Play a fun game together, like your own customized version of "Family Feud".

3) Try a fun recreational activity like miniature golf, or just have an afternoon in the park.

4) Attend a favorite sporting event, concert or other social event that team members would enjoy (important to know your team on this one!).

5) Last but not least, anything with FOOD seems to be a big hit. Either having food catered in or going out to a nearby restaurant seems to always be a hit.

A tremendous yet overlooked tool that leaders can use to help build camaraderie is recognition. To help conduct recognition well, consider these five recognition principles:

- 1) Be specific about what is being recognized.
- 2) Do it in person.
- 3) Be timely.
- 4) Be sincere.
- 5) Recognition should be given for both individual and group performance.

Putting it All Together

Let's look at six ideas we can do to build and maintain engagement with our team members on an on-going basis:

1) Don't let the newbies sink. Get your new employees off to a great start by clearly explaining the goals and expectations of the team, regularly checking in with them, and assigning a teammate as a "buddy" mentor.

2) Create a physically comfortable work environment. Ideas can come from peers, conferences and the employees themselves.

3) Eliminate perks that favor one level of employee over another. Goal is to avoid sending the message that some employees are "second class", when in reality everybody contributes to the success of the team.

4) Avoid micromanaging. Give employees as much flexibility and as many choices as you can. Avoid "dirty delegation" and think about how you would like to be treated.

5) Spill the beans. My former CEO Peggy Fowler once said there are three keys to be a great manager: Communication, Communication and Communication! If we don't communicate a vacuum is created. The vacuum is filled with the rumor mill, which is notoriously negative and will sink morale faster than the iceberg sunk the Titanic.

6) Observe basic courtesies. Never underestimate the value of simple greetings, a smile or saying thank you. These courtesies send a positive message to employees that they are appreciated, and you care.

A final thought: working to develop HPTs is very satisfying and rewarding! I resonate with this quote from Bill George, former CEO of Medtronic and leadership expert: "No individual achievement can equal the pleasure of leading a group of people to achieve a worthy goal. When you cross the finish line together, there's a deep satisfaction that it was your leadership that made the difference. There's simply nothing that can compare with that." Keep working on building HPTs – it's worth the effort!

(About the author: Wes Friesen (MBA, EMCM, CMDSM, MCOM, MDC, OSPC, CCE, CBF, CBA, ICP, CMA, CFM, CM, APP, PHR, CTP) is a proven leader and developer of high performing teams and has extensive experience in both the corporate and non-profit worlds.)