



Why Success and Gossip Don't Mix



Photo by Stuart Miles

By Dr. Noelle Nelson

You know how it goes. You're huddled around the coffee machine, riveted, listening to a co-worker's latest rendition of "and then Tom texted Thea saying she was a conniving . . ."

Oh, the fun of office gossip! Oh, the titillation and subversive thrill that comes out of "I know something about you that you don't know that I know... and I've made sure all the with-it people know and ha-ha doesn't that make me smart and you dumb!" Sometimes it's not even something real – just assumed or presumed – but that doesn't make the gossip any less enticing.

Now, aside from the obvious—that office gossip is rampant, hurtful, and a close cousin to bullying—what impact can it have on you and your success at work?

Work is not a popularity contest. Your success at work is not predicated on whether you make it into the co-worker "in crowd" or are relegated to the invisibles. That was high school, this is real life. Your success at work depends, first and foremost, on your skills and talents, and your ability to apply those skills and talents to your job in a way that pleases **YOUR BOSS**. Not your co-workers, not the "in-crowd," **YOUR BOSS**.

Gossip can get seriously in the way of your success. It is unprofessional, mean, distracting, and never leads to the top.

How to handle gossip in 4 easy steps:

1. Get your priorities straight. What do you want? To be successful at work? To get the projects and assignments you want? The raises, promotions and other kudos? Or to be known as the source for dirt on whomever?

Sure, knowing the skeletons in the closets of various people may give you some leverage for a while, but that leverage is temporary and fragile, because as soon as those people can find a way to get rid of you, they will. No one appreciates blackmail, emotional or otherwise.

2. Rise above. Refuse to engage in gossip. You don't have to get uppity about it: "I don't discuss such matters." And you don't need to alienate your co-workers by reading them the riot act: "That's gossip! That's terrible! How can you even mention that kind of thing?!"

Rise above. When your co-worker says, in that tone of voice that foreshadows some dirty secret: "Did you hear about Mary and John in the break room last night?" Smile in a non-committal manner, and change the subject. Immediately. As in you smile slightly, and immediately say "I've been thinking about our team's presentation of . . ." If your co-worker persists: "Yeah, but, did you hear what I said about Mary and John?" simply ignore it and continue your own thought about the team's presentation of whatever.

We assume that because someone asks us a question we are required to answer it. No, you're not. You can answer a question by offering something quite different, or even nothing at all.

When you rise above, you are no longer fun to play the gossip game with. Your co-worker will, in a remarkably short time, stop coming to you with gossip. Your co-worker may then attempt to gossip about you, to punish you for not playing the game. There we are, back in high school . . .

3. Don't give others something to gossip about.

It's really hard to drum up gossip about someone who comes in on time, does their work professionally and with integrity, is pleasant and civil to all, and keeps their nose out of other people's business.

Keep your private business out of the office, and you make it really difficult for people to babble about it. Mary and John didn't have to use the break room, you know . . . Shelly didn't have to cry about her abortion to her cubicle mate . . . Curtis didn't have to bitch about the dealer reposing his car. . .

4. Be trustworthy

At some point or another, someone at work will either tell you something personal about themselves or their lives, or you'll stumble on information that should be private.

Be compassionate. If someone wants to cry on your shoulder, respect their vulnerability. Keep their problems to yourself. You'll become known as someone who can keep a secret, as someone who respects others.

Now, who do you think will get further in their career: the trustworthy person or the gossip-monger?

Noelle C. Nelson, Ph.D., is a career and relationship expert and trial consultant. For more than 20 years, Dr. Nelson has worked closely with attorneys and corporate executives applying her expertise on how people think, make decisions and how they commit to those decisions. As a relationship expert, Dr. Nelson has empowered countless individuals to be happier, healthier and more successful at work, at home and in relationships. www.noellenelson.com