



Cleaning Business
Builders

Getting the Gossip Out of Your Company

By Liz Trotter



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Understanding gossip is the first step.

The definition that Merriam-Webster gives is

1. information about the behavior and personal lives of other people
2. information about the lives of famous people

We're dealing with number 1 in the work place, but this definition is too broad to be very useful. Using this definition would mean that saying "I just saw Laura, she was walking in from her car" would be considered gossip. While accurate, it isn't very helpful, so let's pare it down a bit more. There are 3 types of gossip – positive, negative, and inane. Getting rid of inane, leaves us with positive and negative. It would seem that positive gossip should be acceptable just as inane is. But what if a woman is very excited and happy to be pregnant and is looking forward to sharing the news? If her friend gossips this positive information, it may not go over well. The problem that positive and negative gossip have in common is when the person being gossiped would not approve of whatever is being said about them. And isn't this the type of gossip you really want to eradicate?

For better understanding we will use the definition of

- information about the behaviors and personal lives of other people that is shared without their approval

This definition is much easier to work with and explain to your employees who will tend to deny that they gossip.

Why do people gossip?

There are 4 basic reasons for the type of gossip that we are talking about.

1. **Needy Gossip** - The first is to raise their own feelings of worth. Those that gossip for this reason will typically not think of themselves as gossips because they won't look closely enough at their own behavior to recognize it as such. This person tends to have low self-esteem. Sharing negative gossip is their way of connecting with people without feeling lesser-than the person they are talking to. After all, if we're both talking about Sally – the focus is on what's wrong with Sally and off of what's wrong with me – at least temporarily. Because this person already feels inferior they won't look for new things that they are doing wrong. Consequently they may not be able to see their piece in this type of gossip without some help. They may defend themselves by stating “but it's the truth”, skirt the blame by pointing at someone else (again), or explain why/how it wasn't gossip. When this person can be shown how their behavior is causing problems and that it is indeed gossip, they will often be happy to put in the effort to change.



2. **Helpful Gossip** - The next reason is to share and be helpful. Those that share gossip for this reason will repeatedly talk about how they hate gossip – and mean it! They don't perceive of themselves as gossiping at all because they only share information to help someone out and stop gossiping from happening with other people. They see themselves as do-gooders and may tend to be righteous in their indignation if accused of gossiping. This is the type of person who will tell Sally that Joanne said she doesn't work as hard as everyone else because “I just think you should know what people are saying about you, it isn't right that they are talking about you behind your back.” This person is the hardest to break of the gossip habit, because they truly do not believe they are gossiping. Even if you are able to break through their thinking and get them to understand their part in the problem, chances are good that they will quickly forget and return to their helpful ways.





3. **Know-it-All Gossip** - The next reason is to be “in the know.” Those that share gossip for this reason know that they are gossiping. They think of it as harmless. They may joke about it and say things like “Anything you want to know, just ask me, I know everything that goes on around here.” While their behavior appears similar to the Helpful Gossip, their motivation is more of the Needy Gossip because they find their value in providing information. Giving this person more information before other people and allowing them to share it can feed their need and successfully eliminate the problem.

4. **Destructive Gossip** - The last reason is to be destructive. Those that share gossip for this reason are typically upset about something and are trying to exact revenge. The offense may only be a slight, or it may be something of significance. Either way, this person will look for ways to cause damage by spreading gossip. A significant difference here is that this person is not at all concerned with whether or not the gossip shared is true, if anyone finds out, or who else may be hurt in the process. Telling Sally that Joanne slept with her husband (when she had no knowledge of it at all) is meant to hurt Joanne. Whether



or not Sally also gets hurt is seen as “not my problem.” Solving the underlying problem that has this person angry will solve the problem short-term, but rarely is this type of person going to be able to stop the behavior when a new hurt is inflicted. The underlying thought of “she deserves it” can be very persuasive.

Now that you know about these 4 basic gossip types it will be up to you to manage your hiring processes to limit those that may cause your culture the most damage.



The steps for handling gossip are the same regardless of the type, but the execution of the steps may change. The steps, in order, are as follows.

- 1) Recognize that gossip has occurred.
- 2) Go to the source of the gossip and identify the Gossip type (Needy, Helpful, Know-it-All, Destructive)
- 3) Get this person to understand, acknowledge and accept responsibility for the gossip
- 4) Identify better future behavior
- 5) Send the gossip to the person(s) being affected by the gossip or bring them together for apology.

Working through the steps with the different Gossip types. Once you have discovered the gossip, you must take steps quickly and consistently if you want to eliminate it from your work place. Below you will find the remaining steps and their implementation based on type.

Needy Gossip

- 1) Recognize that gossip has occurred – Usually very straight forward. Someone will angrily complain that others are talking about them behind their back.
- 2) Go to the source of the gossip and identify the Needy Gossip
- 3) Get this person to understand, acknowledge and accept responsibility for the gossip by talking to them about how what they said directly upset someone. Be understanding as they attempt to shift blame in an attempt not to feel like a bad person. Assure them that while it was indeed gossip, it was not done maliciously and you just need to figure out how to handle similar situations in the future and move on. Use a soft approach when handling the Needy Gossip.

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- 4) Identify better future behavior – this will need to be based on the situation they were in when they began gossiping. Remind them it WAS gossip and help them to identify how they felt. This is critical for the Needy Gossip. What can they do next time the feel the same way?
- 5) Send the gossip to the person(s) being affected by the gossip or bring them together. The Needy Gossip will usually be happy to apologize but may need help because of lack of self-esteem. Facilitate as needed.

Helpful Gossip

- 1) Recognize that gossip has occurred – Usually very straight forward. Usually the person being gossiped about will be more irritated than angry.
- 2) Go to the source of the gossip and identify the Helpful Gossip
- 3) Get this person to understand, acknowledge and accept responsibility for the gossip by talking to them about how what they said was not their business and they should not have been talking about it. Be understanding as they attempt to shift blame in an attempt to get you to understand how they were being helpful and someone “had a right to know.” Assure them that while it was indeed gossip, it was not done maliciously and you just need to figure out how to handle similar situations in the future and move on. Use a soft approach with the Helpful Gossip
- 4) Identify better future behavior – this will need to be based on the situation they were in when they began gossiping. Help them to identify better ways of helping. Possibly going directly to the offending person and talking to them. The Helpful Gossip must have other ways to help that they see as productive or they will quickly revert to old habits. Reminding everyone in a group setting without pointing fingers can be helpful to the Helpful Gossip if they hear directly from others that this type of gossip is unwelcome.

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- 5) Send the gossip to the person(s) being affected by the gossip or bring them together. The Helpful Gossip will usually need to be brought together because they will want to hold onto the idea that they are helping. All 3 parties will need to be present for apologies.

Know-it-All Gossip

- 1) Recognize that gossip has occurred – Sometimes difficult to recognize. Because it is so openly admitted to many people will feel as though they shouldn't be upset and will act as if they aren't bothered by it. This gossip type can insidiously infect your culture to a very damaging degree if you are not on the watch.
- 2) Go to the source of the gossip and identify the Know-it-All Gossip
- 3) Get this person to understand, acknowledge and accept responsibility for the gossip by talking to them about how what they said could be upsetting. They will attempt to tell you that nobody was hurt at all – and may instruct you to even ask for yourself. Work with them to see that sometimes when we are hurt we don't like to admit it, especially in this type of circumstance.
- 4) Identify better future behavior – work with them to come up with specific information that is acceptable to pass along and what is not. They may attempt to lighten the mood. Use a firm approach when dealing with the Know-it-All Gossip. Remain firm until you have agreed on better future behaviors.
- 5) Send the gossip to the person(s) being affected by the gossip or bring them together. The Know-it-All Gossip can usually handle their apologies on their own, but may occasionally need assistance.

Destructive Gossip

- 1) Recognize that gossip has occurred. May present so quickly that it is difficult to realize you have a gossip situation. There may be yelling, fighting, tears, or just extreme anger.
- 2) Go to the source of the gossip and identify the Destructive Gossip.
- 3) Get this person to understand, acknowledge and accept responsibility for the gossip by talking to them about how their behavior is unacceptable and will not be tolerated. Listen to their story, but in no way, shape, or form should you appear to agree with their behavior. You can sympathize with their situation if you are able to remain firm in your conviction that their handling of the situation will not be tolerated. Use a very firm approach when handling the Needy Gossip. You may need to take disciplinary action on the first offense.
- 4) Identify better future behavior. The Destructive Gossip is acting out of emotion so you will need them to focus on future behaviors based on how they felt. These will need to be clearly written down point by point and very simple. For example, the future behavior when I am angry is to call the office and tell them I am angry and what I am angry about. I will count to 20 before I do or say anything. Etc.
- 5) Bring them together but not until the Destructive Gossip has completely understood their part in the problem and is ready to apologize. The other person may additionally need to apologize but that's a separate issue entirely.

The bottom line is that you are in control of the gossip in your office. You will never eradicate it entirely, but by following these steps consistently and in a timely manner you will be able to eliminate almost entirely the extreme cases that can cause the largest amount of damage.



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What is Cleaning Business Builders?

With a combined 60+ years in the residential and commercial cleaning industry, business coaches Derek Christian, Tom Stewart, and Liz Trotter bring together the leadership, operational, and technical expertise both in the cleaning industry and in business best practices. Through their unique development programs, they are helping solve small and large business challenges... to facilitate growth in size, scope, and revenue!

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