HAVE I GOT DIRT FOR YOU

Using Office Gossip To Your Advantage

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INTRODUCTION

Talk about gossip, and usually, the first thing that comes to people's mind is bullying, a toxic workplace, and the violation of privacy. Many articles on the topic urge employees to refrain from gossiping, and for managers to implement a no-gossip policy at work.

Even though office gossip is generally frowned upon, many studies show that gossip in organizations is not only inevitable, but can even be a positive communication tool.

Research shows that people who claim to never gossip tend to be considered as socially inept, but those that are constantly gabbing at the coffee machine are quickly seen as untrustworthy.

There is an optimal amount of time one should gossip, which we call the *sweet spot of gossip*. Finding this optimal amount is a fine balancing act. However, it's not only the amount of time one spends gossiping that will make or break an employee or manager.

Francis McAndrew (2014) observes that most of the studies that have been conducted so far tend to mainly look at how often an individual does or does not participate in gossip. Very little has been done to study the actual content of gossip, and the way in which employees conduct themselves in gossip situations. The author insists that it is quality, not quantity, that counts, and that people who know how to gossip in a skillful way will be more appreciated by their peers and exert more social power. "Gossip is a social skill rather than a flaw", he writes. Another researcher, Brian Robinson (2016), even claims that gossiping well is a virtue.

With this book, I examine academic perspectives as well as observations from employees and managers from all over the world, when searching for this sweet spot of gossip. I will show that it is not just the amount that determines whether one gossips successfully.

Other factors such as reasons for gossiping (chapter 1), credibility (chapter 2), mechanisms (chapter 3), with whom do we gossip (chapter 4), culture (chapter 5), and place (chapter 6), all play an equally crucial role in the art of gossiping successfully at work. Understanding these factors and knowing how to navigate each of them is of the essence. By gossiping in the wrong way, employees can easily lose the trust of their

colleagues and be perceived negatively very quickly. And it's often a fine line that divides acceptable from unacceptable gossip.

After reading this book, readers will understand how and why people gossip, which codes and rules of conduct they should follow, and by doing so, learn how to gossip more effectively.

The claims made in this book are backed by evidence-based studies on gossip, and illustrated by anecdotes and experiences coming from employees working at a variety of organizations from all over the world, as well as from movies, Netflix and television series, art and literature. At the end of each chapter, concrete tips are given to managers and employees on how to avoid some of the common pitfalls.

Not only is the definition of gossip extremely subjective, so is the perception of various gossip scenarios. Different people will perceive the same situation and the same gossiper very differently. It is therefore important to keep in mind that there are no hard truths or tried-and-true formulas. The goal is to get readers to reflect on a variety of situations, and potentially, on their own behavior.

While it is tempting to focus solely on the effects gossip has on an absent third party—take studies on workplace bullying (Rayner & Cooper, 2002; Riggio, 2010)—it is of equal importance to consider its effects on the gossiper and listener as well, according to Giardini & Wittek (2019). This book will examine all three roles, with a strong emphasis on the gossiper, as our goal is to learn how to gossip well.

During the course of this research, I have worked on several research projects, given quite a few lectures and seminars on this topic, and had many of my students participate in my research. Students at ICM (International Communication Management), students taking my Journalism and Media minor, as well as students from other departments at The Hague University of Applied Sciences, have conducted a wide range of interviews with people working in various types of organizations from all over the world.

This book also illustrates how people from different countries gossip differently, and how easy it is for foreigners to cross the line or fall prey to misunderstandings. As more and

more organizations today work in a diverse environment, with multi-cultural teams, reading this book will help employees and managers build trust with each other.

While I have found that some reactions and experiences varied greatly across cultures, others didn't so much. As I always tell my students in my Intercultural Communications classes, one must take cross-cultural theories with a grain of salt. For one, it is impossible to make sweeping generalizations about one country (as a culture is made up of a variety of sub-cultures dictated by factors like region, socio-economic factors, age, and personal characteristics, to name a few). Nonetheless, as interculturalists (such as Meyer, 2014) note, many cultural differences do hold true. For instance, we can easily claim that the Dutch are more direct than the Chinese. Although some Dutch people may be less direct than some of their countrymen, they will still always be a lot more direct than the most direct Chinese person. The goal here is, not to create stereotypes, but to make readers aware of potential differences in order to encourage reflection.

Many people have also asked me how the Covid pandemic has affected gossip, since the office has changed dramatically. Did this revolution not eliminate gossip altogether? Is gossip research not obsolete, now that we tend to work more remotely, behind our computer screens? My answer is a definite 'Absolutely not!' Gossip will always fulfil a strong human need, and will never go away. As we will discuss in chapter 6, while screens may have kicked out the water cooler and coffee machines, they have also morphed into new gossip online environments, which are just as conducive to juicy banter. As many offices adopt hybrid working models, many of our observations about traditional offices, flex offices and online environments, will definitely continue to apply to the current and future workplace.

Moreover, since gossiping is considered a sensitive topic, I have changed the names of our interviewees as well as the details of their organizations, to maintain anonymity.

What is gossip?

Most academic researchers (Grosser et al., 2010; McAndrew, 2014) define gossip as "positive or negative information exchanged about an absent third party." So, saying something nice about a person, like: "Did you see Joe's presentation? It was really great!"

would also be considered as gossip. Using this definition, we can also claim, as Truman Capote did, that "all literature is gossip". Journalism is also gossip.

However, the neutral, academic definition does not come to most people's minds when they hear the word gossip. When the word 'gossip' comes up, people tend to think of something closer to Joseph Epstein's definition: "Telling things about other people that they would rather not have known." In his book *Gossip,* Epstein (2011) describes it as having a sense of secrecy and betrayal.

The fact that gossip is about an absent third party often (falsely) gives the impression that it is unkind and nasty. Yet, Levin & Arluke, cited in Capps (2012), conducted a study where a student sat in the student lounge and eavesdropped on the conversations of other students. They found that 27% of all student gossip was clearly positive, 27% clearly negative, and the rest was mixed. This shows that there is probably a lot less negative gossip than most people would assume, since gossip is generally thought of as being nasty talk only.

One of the challenges of this research, is that many academics and people in general often have different understandings and definitions of the word gossip. De Gouveia et al. (2005) for example, find the neutral, academic definition too vague, and offer a more detailed one: "Gossip in the workplace is the spreading of information between two or more people about a situation or person they may or may not know, behind their back, regarding information that is of no relevance to them. The content of the message is not for public consumption and the disclosure of the information leads to undesirable circumstances such as fueled speculation, false impressions and breakdown of trust."

While this could be an interesting definition, it certainly is a narrow one, and provides a limited view of the functions of gossip.

The understanding of the word gossip also tends to be quite tainted by culture and language. In Afrikaans, 'skinder' means to gossip, but also to slander. Gossip in Hebrew translates as 'lasho harah' which means 'the evil tongue.' In Arabic, 'namima' (النميمه) refers to "sharing someone's words with others in order to ruin their friendly relationships", and is also considered a sin.

During a guest lecture in Paris, I asked the students how they translated the word 'gossip' in French. 'Potins,' 'ragots,' 'commérages,' 'cancans,' 'racontars' they said. Indeed, all of these words do translate as 'gossip.' Yet, I was not completely satisfied, as somehow, these terms bring on extra nuances with them. The act of gossiping in French seems more trivial and pejorative. 'Cancan' initially meant to make a lot of noise about not much. 'Racontar' comes from the verb 'raconter' which means to tell, but the suffix '-ard' gives the word a negative connotation. The other terms are very female-oriented. 'Potin' historically comes from 'potine,' a small heater that women brought with them in the winter, when they met up to chat. 'Commérage' refers to 'commère,' a nosy woman (like a concierge), who talks a lot about others behind their backs. 'Ragot' used to mean a small and chubby person. As the word evolved, its definition also included the talks from such a person (typically a woman), which were usually malicious. In Quebec, the verb used for gossiping, 'mémérer,' stems from 'mémère', an older, rather plump grandmother, who tends to be chatty and indiscreet. (As we will see in chapter 4, gossip tends to be strongly associated with women.)

Origins of the word 'gossip'

Looking at the word 'gossip' itself, one can see that there is a strong gender bias from the very beginning. At its origins, the word 'gossip' is derived from the Old English *godsibb,* which means "God's sibling" referring to the spiritual bond between godparents and godchildren. The term refers to the female friends of a child's mother who were present at the child's birth. As they spent hours waiting for the baby to be born, they chatted, provided moral support, and undoubtedly, bonded with each other. McAndrew (2014) notes that these friends were generally always women.

While the concepts of 'gossip' and 'gossiping' described a phenomenon strictly reserved to women—they were not considered as particularly negative. By the 1500s, the word had taken on a much more negative connotation. 'Gossip' first took on a negative ring in Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream,* and described a woman "of light and trifling character" who is "a newsmonger" and a "tattler". After that, the word took on an even more pejorative meaning, and is still, today, strongly linked to women, according to McAndrew.

An important distinction that we make, is that between gossip and rumors. DiFonzo & Bordia (2007) observe that the terms 'rumor' and 'gossip' are very often used interchangeably by both "naïve laypersons" and "professional scholars". They "are both referred to as 'informal communication', 'unofficial communication' and 'hearsay'". But there is a big difference between the two (see chapter 2).

Many researchers (Foster, 2004; Noon & Delbridge, 1993) define rumors as generally speculative and unsubstantiated talk. Gossip, on the other hand, is considered to be more accurate, as the core message usually remains intact as it is being transmitted.

In this book, we will stick to the academic definition of gossip: positive or negative information about an absent third party, as much as possible, bearing in mind that the definition can fluctuate slightly along the way. During many of our interviews, we noticed how gossip was understood and used in different ways.

Attitudes towards gossip

While definitions may vary, societal attitudes towards gossip and gossipers tend to be very negative.

In *Friends,* Rachel (Jennifer Aniston) cries out with indignation: "I don't gossip! Well, maybe sometimes I find out things or I hear something, and I pass that information on, you know, kind of like a public service. It doesn't mean I'm a gossip!" Her friends, as well as the audience, laugh. The word gossip is very loaded here. Its definition, far less.

Researching Gossip: How transparent can you be?

During an ethics class, I ask my students what would be the best way to research a sensitive topic such as gossip. Most people certainly wouldn't openly share what their true intentions for gossiping are, nor what they actually gossip about.

Alex: I would choose a couple of colleagues who I think gossip really well. I'd get to know them, gossip with them, and take notes.

Me: So, you wouldn't tell them about your research?

Alex: No, otherwise they wouldn't talk to me.

The class laughs.

Me: What you're describing here is a type of ethnographic research. Or participatory research since you'd be playing a role in the gossiping. And yes, this would be a good way of getting information. But is it ethical?

Alex: No, but how else can you get accurate information. As soon as you mention the word gossip…

Anne: I wouldn't mention the word 'gossip,' but its definition.

Because gossip has such a bad reputation, and most people do not think of the more neutral, academic definition, that is what many of the academic researchers have done: they avoided using the word when conducting their studies. Martinescu et al. (2014) told their participants that they were doing a study about "informal group communication". Cole & Scrivener (2013) asked their subjects to take part in a study about "sharing information about others", while Farley, Timme, & Hart (2010) said that their survey was about "informal communication in the workplace". Beersma & Van Kleef (2012) used the definition rather than the word gossip itself to avoid having interviewees censor their responses to appear more honorable. After conducting interviews and/or surveys, all researchers debriefed their subjects and revealed the purpose of their study.