

Ah, It's Only Gossip

Many companies are concerned enough about gossip that they address it in their written Ethics Statement, often in the section discussing the company's culture (as well in the section on diversity) about employees respecting each other.

Let's define gossip as the idle, untrue, and often sensational and groundless talk about the company and its management. How can a company develop a respectful ethical culture when it is plagued by gossip?

Some, of course, view gossip as being natural and expected, especially in a work environment. After all, they ask, isn't this just human nature, and if the boss tries to stop it, isn't she needlessly overreacting? And how will she stop it? By spending all day snooping in the rest rooms, or constantly spying on employees use of social networks?

The better view, and certainly the one addressing the ethical culture of the company and the better nature of its management and employees, is that when a company condones gossip on company time, management is creating an excuse for non-performance or poor performance, and permitting unnecessary and often harmful distractions - and to what end? The experience of some is that it can lead a weakening of company morale as well as to the downfall of a company.

OK, so people will talk idly and with malice. What should management do?

1. If the company has an ethics statement, include something about gossip in it, and encourage employees, when confronted by gossip, to call the attention of the gossiper to the fact that management has publicly stated that the conduct is not acceptable.
2. If there is no ethics statement, and none is likely to exist, management should make clear its views on this issue.
3. Make certain that employees understand that if they repeat gossip that they hear from others, they are just as responsible as is the original gossiper.
4. Encourage employees to challenge the gossiper or to make certain that they object to what is being said.
5. Require that when in doubt, an employee hearing gossip must report what is being said to someone in a position to take appropriate action.
6. Pay attention. An epidemic of gossip can be serious. Don't ignore it.