

Workplace gossip: How to navigate the minefield

We've all experienced workplace gossip in some capacity, whether hearing about it from a colleague, listening to it directly or spreading it ourselves.

It's a minefield to navigate as it can be both positive and negative: it can be how you hear about job vacancies or upcoming opportunities, but it can also be used to spread malicious rumours about others in your organisation. Whatever the intention, if you come into contact with gossip you need to tread carefully. Andrew Brushfield, Director of Robert Half, shares his advice on how to do just that.

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- **First, recognise the seriousness of the situation.** Gossip is bad for business as well as individuals, says Brushfield. "Office gossip may seem harmless, but it can cause serious conflict and lower employee morale, which leads to a decrease in staff productivity. Rumours that are spread throughout the workplace also damage professional reputations and affect the emotional wellbeing of those being gossiped about."

And if you're the gossipier, beware of the consequences. "Individuals who have a tendency to harshly judge their colleagues and an inability to keep sensitive information to themselves will not win friends in the workplace, and it may keep them from being promoted," Brushfield says.

- **What should you do if the gossip is about you?** Brushfield recommends going straight to the source. "Take the professional high ground – approach them and try to resolve the issue. Let them know that you're aware of what's been said and that you'd like to find a solution. With any luck, you'll put a stop to the rumours and gain a reputation as a good communicator."

If it's really bad, take it to the top. "You are well within your rights to escalate the situation to your line or HR manager," Brushfield says. "Inform your boss of the information, but try not to point fingers. Try saying something like this: 'I thought you should know that some people around the office are saying XYZ.'" Your boss is obligated to take it seriously and try to rectify the situation by addressing the rumours head-on. If you're not comfortable speaking to your manager or HR, ask a colleague for their help in telling the right people.

- **If someone tries to engage you in gossip, walk away.** "Politely excuse yourself by saying you've got a lot of work to do or that you don't want to involve yourself workplace gossip – no one would object to that reasoning," Brushfield says. Whatever you do, don't participate in workplace gossip. "You may be in a meeting or at a work function, but just because you're present, doesn't mean you have to participate. The simple act of not responding lets your colleagues know you're not interested."

Another tactic is to change the subject. It might feel awkward, but steering the conversation toward something milder when confronted with negative remarks in the workplace could ease the situation. Brushfield suggests asking "what your colleagues have planned for the weekend, the outcome of a successful team project, or if all else fails, you can always mention a funny cat video you saw online."

- **If you're a manager or team leader, lead by example.** Be a positive role model, and treat others as you would like to be treated. "Avoid being overly judgemental of others and never harshly criticise company leaders in front of team members. Managers who consistently demonstrate integrity and mutual respect will inspire the same from their employees," Brushfield says.

"A savvy manager stays ahead of the game by communicating with their employees, addressing rumours head-on and setting an example with a leadership style built on openness and trust."

Whether you're a manager or not, open and honest communication is always best in these situations. So if you're feeling uncomfortable about gossip in your workplace, speak up!