

GOSSIP
or
PASSIVE AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR

The eighteenth century English author, Robert Burns, is quoted as saying, "The best laid schemes of mice and men oft go astray." Many a man's or woman's best laid schemes, fondest dreams and greatest hopes have been dashed by the insidious poison of gossip. Organizations have been torn asunder by gossip.

Gossip, in its most malicious form is attacking a person in a forum in which he is not present to defend himself. In its more subtle form, gossip can be defined as "casually sharing detrimental information with others who are neither part of the problem nor part of the solution." Gossip creates rumors that, if left unchecked, take on a life of their own. During World War II the U.S. Armed Forces printed posters warning that "Loose lips sink ships." Many an organization's ship has been sunk by idle (or not so idle) gossip.

There are two kinds of gossip: innocent and malicious. One can be just as destructive as the other. The following are five possible reasons people gossip:

1. An individual has been hurt and retaliates in anger.
2. An individual is afraid to confront directly.
3. He or she has a need for attention and approval from certain others to feel accepted.
4. An individual has the desire to build his or her own position artificially by tearing down others.
5. Habit. We get used to relating through gossip.

The only conditions under which we should talk about someone are:

1. It must be the truth.
2. It could be said with that person present.
3. If for whatever reason it would not be appropriate to have that person present, then the person you're sharing your comments or concerns with must be part of the solution.

While shopping in a local discount store, I overheard a young man say to a fellow cashier, "Do you think Sara Ann (not real name) is two faced?" If you have gossiped about a person, take a fearless moral inventory of your motives for doing so. Ask yourself, "Have I been hurt and feel the need to retaliate in an indirect way? Am I afraid to confront directly? Do I need approval and am I attempting to get acceptance from the individuals to whom I am gossiping? Am I attempting to elevate my own position formally or informally by tearing the other person down with gossip? Have I gotten used to a damaging habit?"

Someone once asked me, "What if I am just sharing my opinion?" IF the motive of your sharing your opinion is to discredit someone else or build yourself or your position up, then you need to keep that opinion to yourself and assess your motive because your opinion has become gossip.

If someone begins gossiping to you, ask them, "Have you talked to (the person) about this?" or "I don't see that person that way at all," or "What does that have to do with what we're talking about?" Remember, gossip is an unhealthy foundation for a relationship. Your "real" influence of those around you diminishes the more you gossip.

The practice of gossip in many organizations goes unchecked and unchallenged but its damage is far reaching in time and space. I recently heard an ousted leader of an organization return to reconcile himself to the group that had ostracized him eight years earlier. He said to them, "If I had done half of the things I later heard I had supposedly done, I would not be worthy of standing before you." Ihara Saikaku, a seventeenth century Japanese author said, "There is always something to upset the most careful of human calculations." That something all too often is gossip.

-- Leroy Hamm