

# DON'T QUIT YET!



How to  
Handle  
Co-Worker  
**FRICITION**  
with  
**TENACITY,**  
**HUMOR,**  
and  
**GRACE**



DEBBRA ANNE

# **DON' T QUIT YET!**

*How to Handle Co-Worker Friction with Tenacity,  
Humor and Grace*

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## CO-WORKER CONFLICT ONE

# A Penny for Your Gossip

Have you ever seen a co-worker whispering to another person in the corner then they glance your way? Soon a cold shiver runs down your body as you get the distinct feeling the conversation is about you and your private affairs. Do you sit there and try to ignore it, or do you go and stand up for yourself? Unfortunately, we all have been on the receiving end of distasteful gossip at one point or another. It doesn't matter if it is true or not, it causes stress, diminishes teamwork, increases absenteeism and turnover, and stops us from doing the work we were hired to do. That's why this stressor was one of the most common, and offensive, on the list.

### **Who's talking about me?**

Whether we realize it or not, gossip has probably been around since the dawn of the cave people. Can you imagine what that sounded like? *Ooog Wilma, you see Lucy by rock? She wear ugly T-Rex boots and Saber-Tooth Tiger dress. Need bath too. Snicker. Snort.*

While that may be humorous, the fact that gossiping has been around that long, isn't funny at all. It wasn't until later when humans put an actual label on it. In old England, "gossiper" was first created as a non-derogatory word for two friends, generally women, who talked about others. Somewhere along the line as time went by, however, the word has come to mean something far from cozy and polite.

Today, a gossiper in the workplace is definitely a derogatory term and a person with this habit can cause many problems – some can even be severe and illegal. At its best, information is passed onto another. At its worst, it can be seen as a form of an attack by ostracizing workers,

building power in the gossip initiator that wouldn't have otherwise been there, and punishing those who step out of the norm.

Often, gossiping is a form of soft bullying. It can come from a boss, a co-worker (usually same sex but not always) or even someone who appears to be a friend on the surface. This type of behavior can easily cross the line into Nonsexual Harassment if it is motivated by the victim's protected status like age, nationality, religion, race, health status, disability or military service. Bullying done in regards to these protected classes is illegal harassment and can be grounds for legal action. General bullying is not illegal, even though it contributes to an offensive work environment.<sup>5</sup>

### **WHAT IS A BULLY REALLY?**

Bullying by definition is a form of non-physical violence or psychological violence, and is similar to an abusive relationship that traps victims into emotional desolation.

Because of bullying in schools, bullying in the workplace is now being taken more seriously. A brewing battle is beginning to take place in employment law on a State level as an increasing number of states consider anti-bullying legislation that would allow workers to pursue medical expenses, lost wages and benefits lawsuits and force employers to review their abusive work environment policies. Once laws begin to be passed, it will likely cause a domino effect and other states will follow.<sup>6</sup>

Ironically, gossip is everywhere. You don't have to go far to find that society loves gossip, blessing it as more than just an acceptable practice – it's become the fabric of our news. With the advent of the internet, idolized gossip magazines such as *The Enquirer* and "news" shows like *TMZ*, all have made millions from passing on updates concerning the activity and misery of others. Hollywood definitely has a love/hate relationship with gossiping as they love the attention and free publicity, but often detest when privacy has been disturbed and facts are skewed. The general public certainly has become numb to this method of news dissipation and have embraced it as the norm.

Yes, you may say, news is news, but at the extreme there's a certain exhilarating superiority complex that arises when a gossip-lover reveals a secret to a peer. The latest gossip can enhance social status by being seen as an "authority" as others come to them for news. The chain can be then perpetuated as the receiver now has the choice to become the gossiper.

And that tidbit of gossip? It can become diluted, changed, and even heightened in details depending on the circumstances and how the message was received. Not exactly reliable information.

### **Why...why...why?**

I began examining gossip at a deeper level. What made people want to do it? Why was it so fascinating to participate in this time-wasting activity?

The short answer is people want to feel connected to others. They want a bond with someone who is on their side. The old saying "Misery loves company" rings true and is perpetuated. What isn't on the forefront of the gossiper's mind is that this activity can be very damaging.

Gossiping can make people paranoid as it spreads through the office like wildfire. Everyone starts to wonder what others are saying about them behind their backs. It also wastes the time of everyone in earshot – not only do the gossipers stop working to spread their rumors, but everyone else tends to be less productive when straining to listen in or wonder if the talk is about them. Is there an important piece of work drama being leaked? Or is it of a more personal nature? Maybe someone is on the "troublemaker" list, and that unfortunate soul is *me*.

It is understandable that gossip is something to be reckoned with. Perhaps Human Resources, managers and bosses even unconsciously allow it purely to do the secret dirty work for them, such as breaking undesirable news or creating an air of fear so behavior is kept in check. This "tool" can be used to keep workers from wandering too far outside the rules.

Gossiping needs to be taken as a serious offense in the workplace. More often than not, it's hurtful, flippant, and filled with subjective

information. And if that's not enough, the act of gossiping wastes time, creates uneasiness, increases absenteeism and ostracizes. Ultimately, it snakes its way into productivity, eating away at the bottom line, and manifesting bad blood between team members.

### **Who is the Biggest Bully?**

According to the 2014 Workplace Bullying Institute (WBI) US Workplace Survey, 27% of U.S. workers have reported being subjected to workplace abuse and an additional 21% are witness to bullying. That's 65.5 million workers affected by bullying or the combined population of 15 states. Also, it was found that 69% of the bullies were men and 31% were female; 60% of the targets were women; and women who bullied 68% of the time chose other women to bully. What stopped the bullying? 48% of the bullied targets either quit their job or were forced to quit.

It wasn't long ago an employee of the White House gossiped on her Twitter account about one of the President's young children. It was done in poor taste and her employer quickly found out. Needless to say, she was promptly fired. A note to remember – what comes around goes around, sometimes in the swiftest fashion.

I remember a time in my younger days when I thought gossiping was an acceptable method of business communication. I quickly found out that it can backfire.

I had passed on a confidential piece of information to a friend. Somehow the fact that I had leaked information got back to my boss. Needless to say he was NOT happy and he discussed it with me, lucky for me, privately. I sacrificed being ethical, betrayed my boss's trust, and was put in the "naughty box" all so I could have a brief moment of illusionary power. Not only did I learn who my friends were, but I learned a valuable lesson in obeying the law of silence. Not exactly a shining moment. It has since been a habit I have tried to wipe out of my workplace etiquette. I made a personal rule that if I can't say something nice, kind or true - out loud - then it probably should not be said at all. Besides, it's karma I can definitely do without.

Gossiping can be a hard habit to completely erase, especially when a superior is involved. An instance came up that tested my resolve. As I

was walking back to my office from lunch, my manager happened to walk in with me. Maybe out of nervousness or wanting to be seen as being friendly, she asked what the latest gossip was. I was instantly projected into an awkward position. If I told her anything, it was violating my code of ethics. If I didn't, I could be seen as the non-team player. I don't think she realized the predicament she had placed me in.

Thinking on my feet, I decided to tell her a half-truth – simply I didn't know of any gossip. That way she would not view me as a source for that type of information, and it got me out of explaining my code of ethics which could have caused embarrassment for both of us. She never asked me that question again.

If gossiping is ever going to be wiped out, or at least restricted, it needs to be communicated from top level management and trickled down to employees what is expected. If there is no formal verdict, then at least providing a good example goes a long way.

### **Stopping the madness**

The easiest and most direct way to avoid engaging in gossip is to tell a gossip you're busy, and unless it's something that is important or vital to business, you need to concentrate on the task at hand.

Another way to manage is to recognize that gossiping is some people's way of dealing with fear. Take the high road, and ignore it. It's not that you're better than they are, but they are doing the best they can in the world they live in. If they were more conscious of their poor behavior, they would know it hurts people.

### **Your internal ethics**

You might be surprised to find that the reason gossip in the workplace bothers you has more to do with you and your internal ethics than the gossip.

Before your ego has a chance to draw up a list of arguments, let me explain.

A friend once asked me what was it about gossiping that I found so offensive. Isn't it obvious, I scoffed? It's unkind and unproductive. But if



the gossiping isn't about me, she asked, why do I care? Even if it *is* about me, why do I care about someone else's opinion?

The digging persisted. My ego was in the midst of getting a black eye and it didn't like it one bit.

Then she asked the million-dollar question: Why do I care if gossipers aren't productive and take longer to get their work done?

It was then the true issue was brought to light. I reflected and realized the problem. I work hard to finish my work during regular business hours (and leave on time to attend to my family), and the gossipers often had to stay longer because they obviously didn't get their work done. I felt as if the boss would think they were a better employee for staying late. It really had nothing to do with gossiping.

WHAT? This problem actually boiled down to be about my insecure work issues? My fear?

I realized the only way to shake off this feeling of victimization was to acknowledge it, quit allowing my ego to link it to my own work behavior, and then of course, release these crippling thoughts so I could get back to a more productive state.

## **Ways to quit gossiping**

Become conscious of what you talk about to others. Create conversation rules for yourself and follow them, and don't allow yourself to get sucked into gossip and the same old bad habits. You may find you have a lot less to say because it doesn't meet standards of being kind, true, and necessary. Stick to facts, but be careful because opinions can feel like facts – that's a sign ego is involved. You may lose some friends due to your newfound ethical habit, or realize in short order they never really were your friend in the first place.

## **DON'T QUIT YET!**

### **How to handle the conflict with tenacity, humor and grace:**

- #1. If someone begins to engage in gossip, tell them you're busy and walk away.*
- #2. Make a rule to yourself that says if you can't say something out loud that is appropriate, kind, and true, then don't say it at all.*
- #3. Realize the fact that because you don't like gossiping may be more about your internal issues than about the gossiper. Drill down and figure out why it bothers you. Then let it go.*