

Report on **Business**

Tame the gossip tiger: Bring in the top brass

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Dear Susan,

As a group leader and manager in a mid-sized professional firm, I find myself having to listen to colleagues gossip before, and often during, meetings. Some of it revolves around new projects and hires, but some is critical of senior management, which makes me feel uncomfortable. There has been a recent change in leadership and some people aren't pleased, though personally I think it's too early to tell. How do I distance myself from the complaining or, better still, make it stop?

- *Mr. Chair*

Dear Mr. Chair,

Not happy overhearing all those nattering nabobs of negativism? Invite a member of senior management to attend the next meeting as a pre-emptive strike.

Gossip often starts when a key person is glaringly absent from daily events. Not only will the presence of a member of the top brass halt the slicing and dicing, but by simply showing up, he or she can begin to tackle one likely source of your colleagues' resistance - the feeling that change is being forced on them without any preliminaries.

Gathering information is part of building credibility. Present the next couple of meetings as an opportunity for the brass to groom some key relationships, and, with any luck, it won't be too late for this member of the executive to resurrect his or her reputation.

Looking deeper

Having an administrator present will reduce the harping, to be sure. But while you're in the thick of it, consider mining the gossip for clues to some of the hidden power structures in your organization. Not everything can be understood by looking at the formal chain of command.

That's what Indiana University sociologist Tim Hallett and his colleagues discovered when they videotaped and analyzed 13 meetings that took place at a school that had a new principal. Published last fall, the sociologists' study is one of the first data-driven portraits of organizational gossip, and it shows that professionals can be as savage at eviscerating their rivals as any carnivore on the savannah.

They're just more circumspect when they're being observed.

Prof. Hallett didn't set out to look at gossip.

"I was interested in how people create power through interactions, how we get people to do things without coercing them," he told me.

But when he examined what transpired during meetings, he and his co-authors, Donna Eder and Brent Harder, discovered that people deliver as many barbs in formal settings as they do in informal ones - such as the water cooler or the coffee machine - where we expect to hear the scuttlebutt.

There's simply a difference in style: The more formal the setting, the more nuanced and indirect the put-downs. Still, both settings reveal who's really in charge.

"If you're aware of the gossip, you'll get an informal sketch of who has power in the organization. You can see who's up and who's down. And once you've identified the form of gossip, you can intervene," Prof. Hallett said.

And intervening quickly is a very good idea. His study found that the unchecked harping about the "authoritarian, disrespectful and condescending" leadership prompted the school's staff to send a 119-page letter of complaint about their new principal to municipal authorities and a newspaper.

Sensing (correctly) that her staff was out to get her, the administrator responded by giving the ring-leaders negative performance reviews and moving other employees from their positions or placing their work under unusual scrutiny.

More than a quarter of the staff then left the school, but not before they participated in a 500-school survey that ranked their new principal among the bottom 10 per cent.

Oddly, the administrator's policies were fairly consistent with her mutinous staff members' points of view - on paper, at least.

But because she was aloof, and gossip raged unchecked, her professional reputation was in tatters.

Meeting tactics

How you set up the meeting has everything to do with the tenor of the discussion.

Not only will having a senior manager present help (Prof. Hallett's study found there was three times as much gossip when key administrators were absent), but asking someone to take minutes also cuts down on unconstrained conversation.

Even if the size of the group precludes such formality, it's up to you, as chairperson, to redirect and deflect inappropriate talk.

Switch to a related topic, or switch the target of the discussion, Prof. Hallett advises, because gossip becomes increasingly negative if no one puts a stop to it.

Use any link in the conversation to shift its direction, such as asking people who use sarcasm to be more direct, thus defusing their derision.

Even a mildly positive evaluation can derail cutting remarks. "You could say, 'I notice that Mrs. K. arrives at

seven and doesn't leave until nine. This is someone who's really committed,' " Prof. Hallett offered as an example.

Another trick is to transfer interest from a person who is absent to one who is present, or to another subject.

"One of the interesting things about the meeting environment is that it provides you with a whole bunch of reasons to change topics, whereas if you're on your back porch chatting, you don't have that imperative," he said.

If you sense a building mutiny, it's up to you to start the meeting promptly, move on to each issue at a brisk pace and, when the meeting is over and the griping revs up again, let everyone know that you have to be going, you have tons of work to do.

But make sure you connect with your colleagues before you leave, or you'll be the one they'll be talking about next.

Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of [The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap](#). Her blog, on the science of human relationships can be found at www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-open-mind. Send questions to: spinker@globeandmail.com. No attachments please.

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