

PREOCCUPATIONS

Workplace Gossip? Keep It to Yourself

By SHAYLA MCKNIGHT

Published: November 14, 2009

New York Times

Shayla McKnight says the no-gossip policy at PrintingForLess.com, an online printing company, has helped foster a great sense of teamwork.

I'M a technical service assistant at PrintingForLess.com, an online printing company based in Livingston, Mont. I'm part of a three-person team. We provide quality control for print jobs, call local customers to notify them their orders are ready and send sample packs to potential clients. We also help other departments with special projects and take turns sitting at the front desk, greeting customers and answering the phone.

[Skip to next paragraph](#)

At the beginning of my employment interview two years ago, Marne Reed, the human resources manager who interviewed me, mentioned the company's no-gossip policy. She said something like this: "There's no back-stabbing here, and no office politics. Gossiping and talking behind someone's back are not tolerated." I remember thinking: "Really? That's odd. How is that possible?" Everywhere I've worked people have gossiped, like when someone got into trouble or was laid off.

But I signed the company's "agreement to values" form, and I remember feeling optimistic. The policy sounded refreshing. Now that I've been here for a while, I can say that it makes one heck of a difference in the work environment.

At my last job, gossip was rampant. So many people had negative attitudes. Workers would become frustrated if one person was slacking off, so they'd vent about it.



Anne Sherwood for The New York Times

I, for one, was afraid to say anything because I didn't know who might repeat something I said, change it around or use it against me. People would even gossip about what others did on the weekend, like what bar they went to. It was every man for himself, and it was uncomfortable.

There's a greater sense of being part of a team here than in other jobs I've had. If employees do violate the company policy, a manager speaks to them, and if they don't stop, they're let go. It has happened.

Gossip, however, doesn't seem to interest a majority of the workers here. We all know what's expected, and we hold one another accountable. We count on everyone being aboveboard, and we encourage people to confront one another.

It appears to me as if everyone has bought into the mind-set. If we ever sense that someone might be gossiping, we call that person out and say, "You need to go to the source if you have a question."

I care about my colleagues, but there are things I don't need to know. I've also found that if people know that you don't gossip and that you don't tolerate it, they won't gossip around you. It might be human nature to think an unkind thought about a co-worker, but it's a choice whether or not to actually say it.

There's a mix of personalities in any company, and rarely does everyone in a workplace like one another. But I believe that half the battle is in how people communicate.

When employees are hired here, they're given a communications assessment, a commercial program that the company uses to pinpoint a person's dominant communications style. The styles are linked to colors that identify how each employee likes to communicate.

If someone is a "red," for example, he or she appreciates when others are direct and state the facts quickly. A person who's a "blue" enjoys having all the details, and time to process them. A "yellow" is spontaneous and likes a personal connection.

I'm a "green." That means I'm sensitive and like to be approached as courteously as possible; greens tend to be compassionate and supportive.

Nameplates on our desks have a color bar to identify our styles, or we can easily find them in a company database. This system lets everyone know how co-workers prefer to be approached, and it goes a long way in promoting harmony. If I don't know someone's style, I check before I visit his or her office or send an e-mail message.

IN this economy, probably one of the biggest things people gossip about at most companies is layoffs. Several workers have been let go here in the last couple of years, but we were expecting the layoffs so there was no reason to gossip.

Groups have daily meetings with their managers where they go over the orders and sales goals, so we always know how the company is doing. Our C.E.O., Andrew S. Field, explained that some of us might have to be let go. After the layoffs occurred, he held a meeting, reviewed the reasons again and identified those who were laid off. No one had to speculate about anything — we got the information from the source.

That's not to say people weren't fearful about their jobs, but it's not as if we were blindsided. We knew that the company would have to take action in order to stay profitable.

We respect one another's privacy here. That was obvious to me last year, after I told a few people that I was expecting my first child. When I reached my sixth or seventh month, I passed a colleague in the hall whom I see every day. He glanced at my belly and asked if I was pregnant. "Ya think?" I joked.

He had no idea. My colleagues hadn't spread the word.
As told to Patricia R. Olsen.