

Back Talk

Stop gossip in your group

By Amy Shannon

It's easy to start "talking the nasty" behind fellow members' backs, but it's not so easy to stop. Whether you admit it or not, gossip in a leadership organization is as common as caffeine in the hands of a procrastinator during finals week. So, stop sipping your hater-ade, take out a pen and some paper, and you'll be well on your way to losing those loose lips. Welcome to Gossip 101.

Lesson One: What is gossip?

"Gossip may be defined as any form of harmful or hurtful communication that's not absolutely necessary to share," says Bob Burg, co-author of *Gossip: Ten Pathways To Eliminate It From Your Life And Transform Your Soul*. Now that we're in agreement about what gossip is, let's move on to...

Lesson Two: Why do we gossip?

OK, your organization has been diagnosed with a bad case of gossip. But why? There are many reasons why people gossip. "Sometimes people don't feel good about themselves and have low self-esteem," Burg says. "This can lead to people thinking the only way to bring themselves up is to bring fellow members down. These people may think that doing this is easier than working on their own faults." People's lives get boring and they end up looking for a source of excitement. It also allows some people to feel like they're a part of the group—there's nothing that will bring two people together faster than bad-mouthing a mutual acquaintance.

"I honestly don't think people can help themselves," says Dr. Frank McAndrew, a psychology professor at **Knox College** in Illinois. "It's part of human nature and our interest in what people are up to." Because gossip is so natural, it's absolutely crucial that organizations create an atmosphere where students feel open to share and talk without going behind other members' backs.

Lesson Three: Why is gossiping a problem?

"Gossip can cause personal resentment that shouldn't be involved in your group and can eventually break down the organization," says Jen Miller, former editor in chief of the **University of**

Tampa's student newspaper, *The Minaret*. "If you lose a person's trust and you offend him, it's going to affect the way you work together."

In addition, gossip can completely undermine an organization's purpose. "I've seen gossip among a group's student leaders destroy morale, hurt the group's public image, and make it next to impossible for the group to be taken seriously on campus," says Steven Roberts, co-chair of SPEC-TRUM at **Kent State University—Stark Regional Campus** in Ohio. "It took the group several years to recover."



Lesson Four: How can gossip be stopped?

"The best way to prevent gossip is to outline it and make it clear that there's an open policy," Miller says. If you take the time to educate your organization's members in advance on the pitfalls of gossip, you're less likely to have problems with it later on. Have a meeting, make guidelines, agree to certain points, and stick to them.

"The manner in which my vice president and I dealt with gossip was not innovative, but was rather productive," says Chris Mathias, student body president at **Boise State University** in Idaho. "I established an unwritten policy from the day I was sworn in that said no one on the executive staff is allowed to close their office curtains, nor are they allowed to close their doors while in their offices unless a student comes by and needs to privately discuss an issue."

Lesson Five: Got solutions?

Sometimes, the best response to gossip is no response. "Refuse to listen to gossip, slander, and other negative forms of speech," Burg says. "If you're on a diet, don't bring the cake and cookies into your home. If you're ending gossip, try and keep away from conversations that may tempt you to listen or chime in."

However, others believe you should take a proactive stance. "Your best bet is to get it out in the open," Roberts says. "If you ignore it, it'll just fester and grow until it has to be addressed. Make a general announcement that gossip won't be tolerated during meetings and other official gatherings. Acknowledge that gossip can't be policed outside official functions and explain that gossip among members, wherever it occurs, can be detrimental to the entire group."

The longer you wait to address the situation, the longer it's going to fester and cause more problems. You might be able to turn off the gossip spigot by talking with the source privately. "The first thing you should do if you know who started it is to have a meeting with the person to stop it there," Miller says.

Prepare what you're going to say and approach the individual with kindness in order to avoid lashing out in anger. If you create a situation in which the person becomes defensive, nothing good will come of it.

When all else fails, a little creativity can help put a stop to the rumor train chugging through your organization. "What if everyone who gossiped decided to do the opposite and do 'reverse gossip'?" Burg asks. "In other words, you talk good about people—'Now, isn't Dave a hard worker or isn't Mary a great person?'" Students are bound to talk about the people in their lives, and choosing to spread kind words around instead of gossip and rumors

creates a healthier environment

where everyone is better off.

Burg also suggests a solution that can work your members' wallets to serve as a reminder not to gossip. "A real estate agency once set up this workplace system that centered on the idea that behavior that gets rewarded gets repeated. Each employee had to put \$1 in a bucket whenever someone said something that was hurtful. At the end of the month, they gave it to a charity," Burg says.

Lastly, setting a good example is one of the best policies when sustaining a successful gossip-free organization. If you refuse to gossip or listen to it, members of your organization will see this and possibly think twice before letting loose last night's "juice!" 🍷

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