

Title:

Gossip and the Destruction of Careers

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906

Summary:

How gossip, often viewed as harmless fun, can ruin careers.

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Article Body:

Does your career have a worm embedded in it, destroying it secretly, as you perform the tasks you believe will assure success? Nothing makes standing in a supermarket line more enjoyable than reading the tabloids, finding out some gossip on the celebrity of our choice. And it's so innocent, harmful to no one. As a matter of fact, it seems the more gossip piled on an individual in those pages, the higher the salary they're able to command for their next project. But you can be assured, this equation doesn't apply to you. Gossip not only will not enhance your salary, it has the potential to take it away completely.

I've seen it all, wherever people gather under one roof for a common purpose. The common purpose is the employer's. Everyone else is there to provide for their families and themselves. But so very often, these factors fade in importance to issues that are the shame of human nature, the destruction of the other. I've seen individuals attempt to create hardship for others and their families because the person reminded them of a past spouse. Though it offers little solace, if you find yourself the target of a sustained, vicious gossip campaign, you probably possess positive qualities your attackers lack. Jealousy is at the root of much of this. Those viewed as inferior are generally dismissed by the gossip channel as stupid or silly, and rarely generate malice. We all know the value of education, but there are those who will orchestrate your downfall because you've attained something they envy. It's much easier to sabotage someone with an education superior to yours than it is to attend classes, write papers and take tests.

Of course, this possibility strikes many as an unlikely outcome. After all, the more educated you are, the higher you'll rise in the organization, thus finding protection in your academic efforts.

But companies seldom adhere to the organizational charts that seem so

comforting. There is an informal network of influence that can bring you to your knees through the effects of a thousand cuts. Long term employees, some malicious, some bored and in search of excitement, excitement that will not harm them in the eyes of their employer, have created deep cover channels of gossip. These are capable of ruining a person's effectiveness on the job without him or her ever gaining an inkling of what has transpired. Those engaged in these channels know their effectiveness is dependent on the subject of their ire remaining ignorant. This prevents any action being taken that can either prove the allegations false or worse yet, the victim going to a higher authority, possibly exposing the members of the channel. I know of a case where a director, who was initially viewed as a star, in the course of a few weeks couldn't elicit a hello from the janitorial staff. It was only after he was a marked man that someone, after a few drinks, took pity on him. Because his life didn't provide the information necessary to do the job, lies were freely circulated by a number of enemies he didn't know existed. He was informed that it was common knowledge he met a female employee a few blocks from work each evening to take her to a motel. He was supposed to be having sexual relations with another female employee in his office.

Gossip is the great equalizer in the workplace. Character assassination can dissolve your degrees and accomplishments in the eyes of others, making you far less than those who didn't bother with an education. I'm always amused when I read an article by an expert in the field of employment who tells you to carefully assess your faults if you're experiencing difficulty in an organization. The logic underlying such advice is clear. Companies are pristine environments and if you aren't fitting in, obviously you have a problem that needs to be addressed. I too am familiar with the types of organizations they're describing. They exist in the grad school textbooks. I've never encountered such an organization outside of those pages. And remember, it's usually the victim that questions him or herself incessantly. Advising them to continue to do so can have negative consequences. The victimizers seldom engage in such soul searching. Their acts, always self serving, are couched in concern for the good of the organization.

Why would an employer allow behavior so contrary to group cohesion to persist. Believe it or not, it does help create cohesion, at least among those participating in the channel. There are other employers who find the supposed knowledge about someone they see everyday alluring. Since others are not aware of the actual gossip, they develop a negative view of the target through complaints about work related matters. Frequently, the group will take a hypercritical view of the person's work output, going over it with a fine tooth comb. These are the reports that find their way to the employer. This is the reason the person has entered a period of insecurity. He or she has been

devoured, carcass thrown to the pavement. Satisfaction permeates the organization for a while, momentary satiation. But they wait in deep cover, on the lookout for a member of the herd separated from the pack, far from the leaders. But patience must be exercised. Complaining too frequently gets you labeled a complainer. The channel and its offshoots lose effectiveness with overuse