

THE EXTRA POINT

BY JERRY ROBERTS



132 What's the Deal With Gossip?

Everybody knows that workplace gossip isn't so good for an organization. But, well, what's really the deal with gossip? I'm Jerry Roberts and let's see if let can clear that up today, on The Extra Point.

Some people think of gossip as being the juicy, perhaps even slanderous tidbits of info about another person's personal or professional activities.

This can be a mixture of truth, half-truth, and even untruth. Gossip can be thought of as just telling it like it is, while others see it as a method of attacking another person or, in some cases, the organization as a whole.

Some experts even go so far as to position workplace gossip as a form of workplace bullying...workplace violence.

Gossip is no joke. Some of the negatives are lost productivity, loss of trust and morale, anxiety and stress, divisiveness, feelings that are bent out of shape, ruined relationships, and even people getting fed up and quitting.

In a December 2013 ruling, National Labor Relations Board Judge Donna Dawson struck down what she called an "overly broad" no-gossip policy at Laurus Technical Institute in Atlanta. Laurus had fired a woman because she discussed an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission complaint she had filed alleging sexual harassment and retaliation by her manager.

The institute had a restrictive no-gossip policy that banned talking about someone's personal or professional life when the person or his or her manager wasn't present. Among other things, the policy also prohibited the discussion of work issues and conditions of employment with other employees.

The judge concluded that the policy violated the National Labor Relations Act. If you look to outlaw all forms of gossip, you'd be wise to think twice in light of this ruling.

Your rules on gossip should make it clear that you're not trying to stifle and prevent the worker's right to discuss compensation, hours, overall working conditions, and matters of concern for the individual and organization. If you go too far and your restrictions are too broad, you may end up with an overall position that is unenforceable.

Make it clear what you want to get rid of, the negative factors we discussed. With legal counsel, come up with your definition of what gossip is, its effects, and why the organization wants to protect all workers from those dangers.

Most people who participate in gossip don't believe there's any harm in it. I've heard folks say, "We're just having fun, we don't mean anything by it." Well, tell that to the people who are the targets of the gossip and who aren't having as much fun.

Employers must address this issue, especially when it is often characterized as harassment. Not doing so can lead to legal action in extreme cases.

That said, don't think that you're going to get rid of all workplace gossip. That's Unlikely. Just identify where the win is and go for it.

That's The Extra Point. Get out there and make something good happen today. For 93.3 and the Ray Gibson Show, I'm Jerry Roberts.

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