

“I love this book! Whether you call it gossip, dishing the dirt, or being connected to the grapevine, failure to exchange a wide-range of information is detrimental to your career. Dominique Darmon has done a terrific job of illuminating why you must be in the know at work and how you can do it respectfully and with integrity.”

— Dr. Lois Frankel, author of the *New York Times* bestselling book *Nice Girls Still Don't Get the Corner Office*

“You haven't got this from me – but this is a scandalously good book! Ok, she cuts corners, but with a quick wit, a sharp pen, and a strong base in both literature and anecdote, who cares?”

— Gert Jan Hofstede, Prof. Dr. Ir. Artificial Sociality at Wageningen University and extraordinary professor at North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa, and co-author of the international bestsellers *Cultures and Organizations* and *Exploring Culture*

“*Have I Got Dirt For You* offers valuable insights in an inevitable and valuable aspect of human interaction: gossip. There are great lessons for both the office and Zoom sessions.”

— Jonah Berger, Wharton professor and author of the bestselling books *Contagious*, *Invisible Influence*, and *The Catalyst*

“In this highly readable book, Dominique Darmon has made very clear that there are human behaviors that transcend cultures. Gossiping is a good example of this. While various cultures gossip in different ways, it will remain an important and meaningful activity for humankind. Recommended!”

— Fons Trompenaars, speaker, consultant, researcher, author of *Riding the Waves of Culture*, and co-author of *End of Discussion*

“This is a must-read for everybody who thinks that gossiping is just for evil people. The author makes clear that gossiping can play a positive role, provided that you do it according to the rules of the game. Dominique Darmon explicitly and clearly describes these rules. Who wouldn’t want to know more about that?”

— Len Middelbeek, former editor-in-chief at the NOS Journaal and RTL Nieuws, spokesperson at the Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs and co-author of the book *Public Communication*

“An excellent approach to the concept of gossip and rumor. The science in Darmon’s book is solid and will open your mind to a broader view of these fascinating human qualities. May it stand on equal footing with the art of complaining!”

— Bart Flos, bestselling author of *The Anti-Complain Book*

# Have I Got Dirt For You

*Using Office Gossip to Your Advantage*

*Dominique J. Darmon*



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*To my parents, René and Nicole*



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# Introduction

Talk about gossip, and the first thing that usually comes to people's mind is bullying, a toxic workplace, and the violation of privacy. Many articles on the topic urge employees to refrain from gossiping, and for managers to implement a no-gossip policy at work.

Even though office gossip is generally frowned upon, many studies show that gossip in organizations is not only inevitable, but can even be a positive communication tool.

Research shows that people who claim to never gossip tend to be considered as socially inept, but those who are constantly gabbing at the coffee machine are quickly seen as untrustworthy.

There is an optimal amount of time one should gossip, which we call the *sweet spot of gossip*. Finding this optimal amount is a fine balancing act. However, it's not only the amount of time one spends gossiping that will make or break an employee or manager.

Francis McAndrew (2014) observes that most of the studies that have been conducted so far tend to mainly look at how often an individual does or does not participate in gossip. Very little has been done to study the actual content of gossip, and the way in which employees conduct themselves in gossip situations. The author insists that it is quality, not quantity, that counts, and that people who know how to gossip in a skillful way will be more appreciated by their peers and exert more social power. "Gossip is a social skill rather than a flaw," he writes. Another researcher, Brian Robinson (2016), even claims that gossiping well is a virtue.

With this book, I examine academic perspectives as well as observations from employees and managers from all over the world, when searching for this sweet spot of gossip. I will show that it is not just the amount that determines whether one gossips successfully.

Other factors such as reasons for gossiping (Chapter 1), credibility (Chapter 2), mechanisms (Chapter 3), with whom do we gossip (Chapter 4), culture (Chapter 5), and place (Chapter 6) all



play an equally crucial role in the art of gossiping successfully at work. Understanding these factors and knowing how to navigate each of them is of the essence. By gossiping in the wrong way, employees can easily lose the trust of their colleagues and very quickly be perceived negatively. And it's often a fine line that divides acceptable from unacceptable gossip.

After reading this book, readers will understand how and why people gossip, which codes and rules of conduct they should follow, and, by doing so, learn how to gossip more effectively.

The claims made in this book are backed by evidence-based studies on gossip and are illustrated by anecdotes and experiences coming from employees working at a variety of organizations from all over the world, as well as from movies, Netflix and television series, art, and literature. At the end of each chapter, concrete tips are given to managers and employees on how to avoid some of the common pitfalls.

Not only is the definition of gossip extremely subjective, so is the perception of various gossip scenarios. Different people will perceive the same situation and the same gossiper very differently. It is therefore important to keep in mind that there

are no hard truths or tried-and-true formulas. The goal is to get readers to reflect on a variety of situations and, potentially, on their own behavior.

While it is tempting to focus solely on the effects gossip has on an absent third party—take studies on workplace bullying (Rayner et al., 2002; Riggio, 2010)—it is of equal importance to consider its effects on the gossiper and listener as well, according to Giardini & Wittek (2019a). This book will examine all three roles, with a strong emphasis on the gossiper, as our goal is to learn how to gossip well.

During the course of this research, I have worked on several research projects, given quite a few lectures and seminars on this topic, and had many of my students participate in my research. Students at ICM (International Communication Management), students taking my Journalism and Media minor, as well as students from other departments at The Hague University of Applied Sciences have conducted a wide range of interviews with people working in various types of organizations from all over the world.

This book also illustrates how people from different countries gossip differently, and how easy it is for foreigners to cross the line or fall prey to misunderstandings. As more and more organizations today work in a diverse environment, with multicultural teams, reading this book will help employees and managers build trust with each other.

While I have found that some reactions and experiences varied greatly across cultures, others didn't so much. As I always tell my students in my Intercultural Communications classes, one must take cross-cultural theories with a grain of salt. For one, it is impossible to make sweeping generalizations about one country (as a culture is made up of a variety of subcultures dictated by factors like region, socioeconomic factors, age, and personal characteristics, to name a few). Nonetheless, as interculturalists (such as Meyer, 2014) note, many cultural differences do hold true. For instance, we can easily claim that the Dutch are more direct than the Chinese. Although some Dutch people may be less direct than some of their countrymen, they will still always be

a lot more direct than the most direct Chinese person. The goal here is, not to create stereotypes, but to make readers aware of potential differences in order to encourage reflection.

Many people have also asked me how the Covid pandemic has affected gossip, since the office has changed dramatically. Did this revolution not eliminate gossip altogether? Is gossip research not obsolete, now that we tend to work more remotely, behind our computer screens? My answer is a definite 'Absolutely not!' Gossip will always fulfill a strong human need, and will never go away. As we will discuss in Chapter 6, while screens may have kicked out the watercooler and coffee machines, they have also morphed into new gossip online environments, which are just as conducive to juicy banter. As many offices adopt hybrid working models, many of our observations about traditional offices, flex offices and online environments will definitely continue to apply to the current and future workplace.

Moreover, since gossiping is considered a sensitive topic, I have changed the names of our interviewees as well as the details of their organizations to maintain anonymity.

## **What is gossip?**

Most academic researchers (Grosser et al., 2010; McAndrew, 2014) define gossip as “positive or negative information exchanged about an absent third party.” So, saying something nice about a person, like: “Did you see Joe’s presentation? It was really great!” would also be considered as gossip. Using this definition, we can also claim, as Truman Capote did, that “all literature is gossip.” Journalism is also gossip.

However, the neutral, academic definition does not come to most people’s minds when they hear the word ‘gossip.’ When the word ‘gossip’ comes up, people tend to think of something closer to Joseph Epstein’s definition: “Telling things about other people that they would rather not have known.” In his book *Gossip*, Epstein (2011) describes it as having a sense of secrecy and betrayal.

The fact that gossip is about an absent third party often (falsely) gives the impression that it is unkind and nasty. Yet, Levin & Arluke, cited in Capps (2012), conducted a study where a student sat in the student lounge and eavesdropped on the conversations of other students. They found that 27% of all student gossip was clearly positive, 27% clearly negative, and the rest was mixed. This shows that there is probably a lot less negative gossip than most people would assume, since gossip is generally thought of as being nasty talk only.

One of the challenges of this research is that many academics and people in general often have different understandings and definitions of the word 'gossip.' De Gouveia et al. (2005) for example, find the neutral, academic definition too vague, and offer a more detailed one: "Gossip in the workplace is the spreading of information between two or more people about a situation or person they may or may not know, behind their back, regarding information that is of no relevance to them. The content of the message is not for public consumption and the disclosure of the information leads to undesirable circumstances such as fueled speculation, false impressions and breakdown of trust."

While this could be an interesting definition, it certainly is a narrow one, and it provides a limited view of the functions of gossip.

The understanding of the word 'gossip' also tends to be quite tainted by culture and language. In Afrikaans, *skinder* means to gossip, but also to slander. 'Gossip' in Hebrew translates as *lashon harah*, which means 'the evil tongue.' In Arabic, *namima* (النميمة) refers to "sharing someone's words with others in order to ruin their friendly relationships" and is also considered a sin.

During a guest lecture in Paris, I asked the students how they translated the word 'gossip' into French. *Potins, ragots, commérages, cancans, racontars* they said. Indeed, all of these words do translate as 'gossip.' Yet, I was not completely satisfied, as somehow, these terms bring extra nuances with them. The act of gossiping in French seems more trivial and pejorative. *Cancan* initially meant to make a lot of noise about not much.

*Racontar* comes from the verb *raconter*, which means to tell, but the suffix ‘-ar’ gives the word a negative connotation. The other terms are very female-oriented. *Potin* historically comes from *potine*, a small heater that women brought with them in the winter, when they met up to chat. *Comméragé* refers to *commère*, a nosy woman (like a concierge), who talks a lot about others behind their backs. *Ragot* used to mean a small and chubby person. As the word evolved, its definition also included talk from such a person (typically a woman) that was usually malicious. In Quebec, the verb used for gossiping, *mémérer*, stems from *mémère*, an older, rather plump grandmother, who tends to be chatty and indiscreet. (As we will see in Chapter 4, gossip tends to be strongly associated with women.)

## Origins of the word ‘gossip’

Looking at the word ‘gossip’ itself, one can see that there is a strong gender bias from the very beginning. At its origins, the word ‘gossip’ is derived from the Old English *godsibb*, which means “God’s sibling,” referring to the spiritual bond between godparents and godchildren. The term refers to the female friends of a child’s mother who were present at the child’s birth. As they spent hours waiting for the baby to be born, they chatted, provided moral support, and, undoubtedly, bonded with each other. McAndrew (2014) notes that these friends were generally always women.

While the concepts of ‘gossip’ and ‘gossiping’ described a phenomenon strictly reserved to women, they were not considered as particularly negative. By the 1500s, the word had taken on a much more negative connotation. ‘Gossip’ first took on a negative ring in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and described a woman “of light and trifling character” who is “a newsmonger” and a “tattler.” After that, the word took on an even more pejorative meaning, and is still, today, strongly linked to women, according to McAndrew.

An important distinction that we make is that between gossip and rumors. DiFonzo & Bordia (2007) observe that the terms ‘rumor’ and ‘gossip’ are very often used interchangeably by both “naïve laypersons” and “professional scholars.” They “are both referred to as ‘informal communication,’ ‘unofficial communication’ and ‘hearsay.’” But there is a big difference between the two (see Chapter 2).

Many researchers (Foster, 2004; Noon & Delbridge, 1993) define rumors as generally speculative and unsubstantiated talk. Gossip, on the other hand, is considered to be more accurate, as the core message usually remains intact as it is being transmitted.

In this book, we will stick to the academic definition of gossip: positive or negative information about an absent third party, as much as possible, bearing in mind that the definition can fluctuate slightly along the way. During many of our interviews, we noticed how gossip was understood and used in different ways.

## Attitudes towards gossip

While definitions may vary, societal attitudes towards gossip and gossipers tend to be very negative.

In *Friends*, Rachel (Jennifer Aniston) cries out with indignation: “I don’t gossip! Well, maybe sometimes I find out things or I hear something, and I pass that information on, you know, kind of like a public service. It doesn’t mean I’m a gossip!” Her friends, as well as the audience, laugh. The word ‘gossip’ is very loaded here. Its definition, far less.

### **Researching gossip: How transparent can you be?**

During an ethics class, I ask my students what would be the best way to research a sensitive topic such as gossip. Most people certainly wouldn’t openly share what their true intentions for gossiping are, nor what they actually gossip about.

Alex: I would choose a couple of colleagues who I think gossip really well. I'd get to know them, gossip with them, and take notes.

Me: So, you wouldn't tell them about your research?

Alex: No, otherwise they wouldn't talk to me. [The class laughs.]

Me: What you're describing here is a type of ethnographic research. Or participatory research since you'd be playing a role in the gossiping. And yes, this would be a good way of getting information. But is it ethical?

Alex: No, but how else can you get accurate information? As soon as you mention the word 'gossip'...

Anne: I wouldn't mention the word 'gossip,' but its definition.

Because gossip has such a bad reputation, and most people do not think of the more neutral, academic definition, that is what many of the academic researchers have done: they avoided using the word when conducting their studies. Martinescu et al. (2014) told their participants that they were doing a study about "informal group communication." Cole & Scrivener (2013) asked their subjects to take part in a study about "sharing information about others," while Farley, Timme, & Hart (2010) said that their survey was about "informal communication in the workplace." Beersma & Van Kleef (2012) used the definition rather than the word 'gossip' itself to avoid having interviewees censor their responses to appear more honorable. After conducting interviews and/or surveys, all researchers debriefed their subjects and revealed the purpose of their study.

One study by Peters & Kashima (2015) looked at how gossip is portrayed in popular culture and noted that 60% of quotes about gossip condemned gossipers as "immoral individuals who do harm to those that they talk about."

De Gouveia et al. (2005) from the University of Johannesburg also claim that gossip in the workplace is harmful and toxic. "Organizations could experience increased staff turnover, premature

job resignations, as well as the loss of efficient and effective employees. [...] Gossip could also undermine an individual, a group or organization, break down trust between employees, and strain ethical values such as openness, transparency and honesty. Consequences such as these could decrease staff morale, motivation and interpersonal respect between employees.”

When googling ‘office gossip,’ a large number of articles appear: ‘How to address office gossip as a manager,’ ‘Managing: How to stop employees from gossiping,’ ‘Negative effects of office gossip on the work environment,’ and ‘How to stop office gossip once and for all.’ In these articles, gossip clearly has a negative ring! Many, such as De Gouveia et al. (2005), recommend creating a “gossip-free working environment with high moral values” by implementing an anti-gossip policy.

Many organizations have tried. Even politicians. For example, the mayor of a small town in the Philippines instituted a law that made gossiping illegal, according to an article in *The Guardian*. Citizens swapping stories about their neighbors’ affairs, divorces, or bankruptcies received a fine and were forced to do community service. The mayor’s goal was to show that his town had “good people” and that it was “a good and safe place to stay” (Ellis-Petersen, 2019).

However, trying to get people to stop gossiping is far from a realistic goal, but certainly an understandable one. While we do not believe that it is possible, or even desirable, to eliminate gossip, there are ways to minimize it and to channel it in positive ways.

To add an extra layer of complexity, we noticed that people’s attitudes to gossiping tend to differ significantly. When we asked several employees from different countries if they gossip at work (before giving them the more neutral definition of gossip), their responses were quite varied. Leonie (63), who works as a receptionist for a municipality in the Netherlands, claims: “I don’t like to gossip myself. I really don’t like it. And if I hear something, I keep it to myself.”

Asha (27), who comes from Trinidad and now works in a large educational institution in the Netherlands, also explains: “I just

really don't like gossip. I prefer a person who talks about ideas, situations, things, concepts, rather than people. In the office setting where I was, there was a lot of gossip going on, but whenever any gossip would start, I would just walk out. I just don't want to hear it. I just want to remain neutral. That's me."

Similarly, several of the Dutch employees that we interviewed initially claimed that they do not gossip and try to avoid it as much possible. With a little probing though, they did admit to indulging in it as well, but stayed well within the limits of what is considered acceptable.

Nevertheless, certain employees coming from Latin countries responded proudly, with some glee, that they love to gossip. Spanish marketing consultant Pietro (21) exclaimed: "Of course I gossip. It is part of the work. It is an entertaining thing to do and it helps you get away from work for a little while."

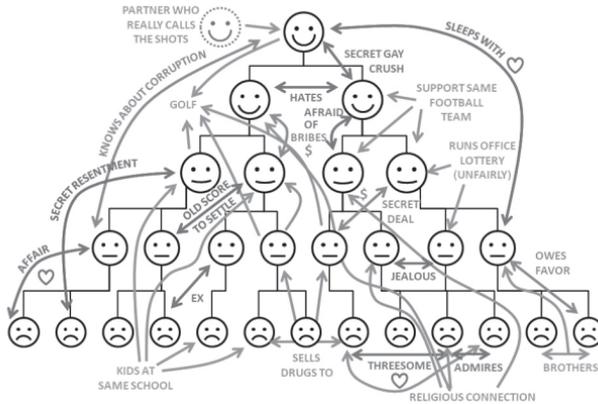
"I usually gossip a lot with my colleagues," Jean-Paul (24), a veterinary doctor from Brittany, France, admitted proudly. "We gossip about all sorts of things: peoples' family life, love life, problems at work, or anything else."

During my communications classes, when I ask my students whether they gossip, most laugh and admit that they sometimes do, with the same tone of voice that they would confess to cheating on tests from time to time. Some say they would never gossip about someone if it could seriously harm them. I agree. "But what would you do in this case?" I ask my third-year, international communications students during a class called Internship Prep. "You discover that two of your direct colleagues are having an affair. You are working as an intern for an international organization and have been there for a few months. Would you gossip about that? Should you?"

They laugh, joke a bit, and all agree that this bit of information is juicy indeed, but most answer that no, they would take the moral high ground and keep the information to themselves. "It would reflect badly on me if I gossip," one student explains.

I insist. "Would you want to hear the gossip about the affair from your colleagues? What could you gain from this knowledge?"

**Figure 1 The informal organizational chart**  
(Braun & Kramer based on Brian Robertson)



The majority of the students perceive this type of gossip as negative. “Actually, it’s none of my business,” one says. “If someone gossips about someone else, like this to me, I will think that they’ll also be gossiping about me.”

“But let’s say that the CEO is having an affair with the secretary. Even though she is at the bottom of the pyramid in the organization, she will have a lot more power and influence than your line manager. Also, if you go out drinking with your colleagues, and she is there, you would probably avoid dissing your boss if you know she is intimate with him.”

I remind the students about their internal communications classes, and how they often have to map an organization’s structure to understand how communication flows internally. Who is at the top and who is at the bottom, in which departments? Which employees are the decision makers? If the secretary is friends with the manager, she may wield a lot more power than indicated on the flow chart. As Danielle Braun and Jitske Kramer state in *The Corporate Tribe* (2018), informal networks may be just as important to understand as the formal ones (see figure 1).

The students agree. In this case, gossip means survival.

In the television series *Emily in Paris*, Emily Cooper (Lily Collins), a young American from Chicago, moves to Paris to work in a French marketing firm. Emily meets Antoine (William Abadie), one of the firm's clients, at a party. Being the typical cliché of the womanizing Frenchman, Antoine openly flirts with Emily, even though he is married. The next day, Sylvie (Philippine Leroy-Beaulieu), Emily's manager (who is already quite hostile towards her), comments that she had quite the effect on Antoine. "Do you fancy him?" she asks. A bit later, Julien (Samuel Arnold), one of Emily's colleagues, tells her that Antoine is actually Sylvie's lover. Definitely important information to have before even thinking of taking such a flirtation any further!

Not only do people have different attitudes to gossiping in general, but they also differ on their perceptions towards various gossip situations.

There is an interesting study by De Gouveia et al. (2005), where several gossip case studies were presented to respondents who had to determine whether these scenarios were light gossip, quite a bit of gossip or not gossip at all.

One case was: "While sipping on their coffee, Jessica remarks to Brett that the boss is very late for work as it is already 10:00 am and there is no sign of him anywhere. Brett tells Jessica that their boss probably wouldn't be at work due to the loss of his mother the previous evening. One week later, while Brett is at his table doing some work, the boss calls him into his office and says, 'Brett, I would appreciate it if in the future you keep quiet about my personal life instead of sharing it with the entire office.'"

In this case, even if it is clear that the boss took offence, half the respondents considered that Bret did not gossip. The other half considered it to be either light gossip, and a few to be quite a bit of gossip.

People can easily interpret a gossip situation very differently. For each scenario in the study, opinions varied greatly. Some people found that certain types of gossip were inappropriate, whereas others found them to be totally acceptable. A person

who particularly values privacy will judge someone harshly just for sharing information that someone else would not consider particularly private. That the study was conducted in South Africa already skews the results, as people from different cultures will likely interpret various situations even more differently (see Chapter 5).

It is important to realize that many people have a different understanding and interpretation of the same gossip situation. Everyone operates using different codes and values, especially if they come from a different country or work in a different corporate culture.

## **Why we can't we keep our mouths shut**

While it is clear that gossiping is a minefield fraught with danger, we can hardly refrain from flapping our lips. Why is that?

Several studies (Elmer, 1994) state that gossip can be a valuable form of social communication and is actually inevitable. Apparently, up to two-thirds of all conversations include some references to third-party doings, and gossip makes up approximately 65% of the content of everyday conversation. So why is it suddenly big news when at a NATO convention, Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau is caught on camera, huddled closely with colleagues French president Emmanuel Macron, British prime minister Boris Johnson, and Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte, gossiping about US president Donald Trump, during a reception at Buckingham Palace? According to *The Washington Post*, Trudeau could be heard saying incredulously: "He takes a 40-minute press conference off the top." Trudeau confirmed that was a reference to Trump's long and unscheduled question-and-answer session with journalists a few days earlier. Trudeau also said: "You just watched his team's jaws drop to the floor."

The footage was posted online by Canadian broadcaster CBC and has been viewed more than 5 million times. This incident was covered by major news outlets and broadcasters all over the

world with headlines like: “Trudeau, Macron caught gossiping like ‘mean girls.’” (Trump’s reaction, when he found out, was to call Trudeau “two-faced”). Audiences all over the world seemed fascinated that something like this could happen. But why should it come as such a surprise that even world leaders could indulge in gossip from time to time?

In his bestselling book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, Yuval Noah Harari (2014) asks: “Do you think that history professors chat about the reasons for World War One when they meet for lunch, or that nuclear physicists spend their coffee breaks at scientific conferences talking about quarks? Sometimes. But more often, they gossip about the professor who caught her husband cheating, or the quarrel between the head of the department and the dean, or the rumors that a colleague used his research funds to buy a Lexus.”

Why? McAndrew (2014) claims that gossip is central to the social life of humans. Historical records and cross-cultural studies show that gossip has been shared by people of all ages and cultures. Gossip goes as far back as our prehistoric past, and it became a part of our evolutionary adaptation. People who were interested in other peoples’ lives were more successful than those who were not. It is the genes of those individuals that have been transmitted from one generation to the next.

Harari (2014) notes that it is because of gossip that we, as a species, actually began to rule the planet. Before we began gossiping with other *Homo sapiens*, we were merely just like other mammals in the food chain. By learning to gossip, we were able to create friendships and alliances, which allowed us to cooperate with each other. Doing so gave us an edge over other animals. “Social cooperation is our key for survival and reproduction,” the author claims. “It is not enough for individual men and women to know the whereabouts of lions and bison. It’s much more important for them to know who in their band hates whom, who is sleeping with whom, who is honest and who is a cheat.”

Although the nature of the gossip has evolved over time (we’re no longer talking about which caveman to avoid or which tribe is

hostile), and our channels of communication have become more sophisticated (as we also use emails, phone calls, and WhatsApp), we still gossip. Harari (2014) states: “It comes so naturally to us that it seems as if our language evolved for this very purpose.”

Even in religious scripture gossip plays a central role. Capps (2012) maintains that the Gospels are very much the product of gossip. “Without gossip, no Gospels,” he says. “We can open any Gospel at any page and begin reading, and what we find ourselves reading is a series of happenings. [...] And happenings are far more important than ideas.” The author explains that such stories make a deeper impression than abstract concepts. Although the Bible is generally very critical of gossip (as we will see in Chapter 5), Capps argues that gossip actually gives the readers the impression of gaining mastery by taking possession of someone else’s experience. In this case, readers of the Gospels can more easily “take possession of the very experience of Jesus, to make oneself an intimate of his.”

“In short, the line between gossip and Gospel is a very fine one,” Capps explains. “To say this is not to disparage the Gospel, but to elevate gossip.”

This fine line applies to a variety of fields, such as literature, journalism, and marketing. As Barbara Walters, a well-known American journalist, said: “Show me someone who never gossips, and I’ll show you someone who isn’t interested in people.”

In the fields of advertising and marketing, gossip (or, in this case, word of mouth) happens to be one of the most powerful marketing tools. In his book *Contagious*, Jonah Berger (2013) observes that word of mouth is the primary factor behind 20% to 50% of all purchasing decisions, and its impact largely surpasses that of traditional advertising. Similarly, *McKinsey Quarterly* claims that word of mouth generates more than twice the sales of paid advertising. And it’s a lot cheaper.

People sharing their experiences about products, services, and salesmen can easily make or break someone’s reputation. It’s not a surprise that many salesmen have the motto: “If you hate our service, tell us. If you love it, tell others” (Rooks et al.,

2011). Gossip, according to Giardini & Wittek (2019a), is “key to sustaining or breaking cooperation in human societies.”

Gossip, cooperation, and reputation are very much intertwined. But not only the reputation of the third party is affected: the gossiper’s and listener’s reputations are also very much at stake. The first question we may ask ourselves is, what is the optimal amount of time we should spend gossiping in front of the coffee machine?

## **How much is too much?**

At which point does too much gossip become counterproductive? There are indeed moments where we should refrain from gossiping altogether, and moments where we are actually obligated to gossip.

Pim (28), a manager at an engineering firm in the Netherlands, says: “I think gossip is always something that will happen. You cannot avoid it. Gossip does show that the workplace can be fun, and we are all human, and we give people the space to be human. But when people gossip too much, it becomes a toxic environment and some employees might not feel safe at their workplace, and that is something that needs to be avoided at all costs.”

Gossiping is healthy. Yet too much can easily become harmful. Studies show that people who either gossip too much or too little will be perceived negatively. Therefore, it is important for employees to be aware of just how much they should gossip.

If you are at the low end of the gossiping spectrum, and proudly claim that you never gossip at all, chances are high that you will be seen as not socially attuned, or that you have been excluded from your social network. Not to gossip (or not to show a minimum of interest for gossip) is to be “quickly marginalized from the local social fabric” (Foster, 2004).

Surprisingly, many managers encourage their employees to stay clear of gossip altogether, citing a loss of productivity. In an article called “The next time you want to complain at work, do

this instead' in the *Harvard Business Review*, Peter Bregman (2018) claims that in a study of 200 employees, the majority spent 10 or more hours per month complaining (i.e., gossiping)—or listening to others complain—about their bosses or upper management. “Even more amazing, almost a third spent 20 hours a month doing so.” And that doesn’t take into account the gossip that goes around about peers and employees. This time could be spent a lot more constructively, according to the author. He therefore recommends confronting the third party directly rather than gossip behind their back. In this way, there would be no need to gossip.

During the course of my research, interviewees often assured us that they don’t gossip. If they have a problem with someone, they will tell them honestly. However, expecting employees to be direct may greatly conflict with one’s culture (see Chapter 5).

Other studies (see Baumeister et al., 2004) confirm that never gossiping is indeed a bad strategy, and it often leads to negative consequences. An employee who does not pass along some gossip that could have been beneficial to a colleague, for example, could be poorly evaluated. Let’s say that you know that your boss is a sleazebag and has a reputation for hitting on a record number of employees. If a new, young colleague comes to work for your department, and soon enough, you notice the sleazebag flirting with her but choose to say nothing, you will eventually be judged quite poorly.

On the other end of the spectrum, people who gossip too much may also be quickly perceived as “indiscriminate, unselective and untrustworthy.” Despite the impression that gossipers may have a lot of friends, this is often just an illusion. “Perhaps high gossipers are individuals who are welcome into our social networks for fear of losing the opportunity to learn information, but we tend to keep them at arm’s length,” Farley (2011) writes. Moreover, high gossipers are often perceived as less “emotionally warm” and tend to be less likeable than low gossipers. Robinson (2016) also cautions that too much gossip becomes ineffective and counterproductive, as people stop listening and stop taking you seriously after a while.