

# Turning Workplace Gossip into a Springboard for Productive Behaviour

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**How to cite this paper:** Attiah, S. J., & Alhassan, I. (2022). Turning Workplace Gossip into a Springboard for Productive Behaviour. *Voice of the Publisher*, 8, 65-82. <https://doi.org/10.4236/vp.2022.83007>

**Received:** June 10, 2022

**Accepted:** September 20, 2022

**Published:** September 23, 2022

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## Abstract

Gossip has been one of the employees' most frequent informal activities, especially in the last few decades. However, both seasoned and early-career administrators sometimes miss out on the benefits that come along with its practice, resulting in an over-emphasis on its dangers. This study examined the reasons for the concept of the gossip phenomenon, its functions and effects, and how to get the best out of it in an enterprise space among public sector employees in Ghana. The study, which was based on secondary data, identified four main functions of gossip in an organisation: information-sharing, entertainment, friendship, and penetration. We found that, in terms of negative gossip, the individual and the organisation have a responsibility to discourage the gossip act. It was further revealed that sharing individual and team victories encourages positive gossip, which in turn reinforces a strong bond among team members and improves employees' morale in the workplace. We conclude that, as long as man remains a social being and gossip is a social activity, then everyone has a propensity to gossip. Therefore, gossip is inevitable, but what makes gossip thrive is not simply the social nature of man; rather, it is the social support that gossip receives from the group or network with which it is shared. Thus, going forward, we recommend, among other things, that refusing to respond to gossip and effectively repudiating it with support is the surest way to stop gossip in its tracks.

## Keywords

Gossip, Function, Organisation, Phenomenon, Workplace, Negative

## 1. Introduction

It is essential to understand that human beings are social animals that favour alternative forms of interaction: formal, informal, verbal, horizontal, diagonal, on

chains, on wheels, on vines, etc., according to their preferences. Gossip, as a phenomenon, has been investigated in different fields of research, such as anthropology, psychology, and specifically evolutionary psychology, sociology, management, behavioural economics, communication studies, organisational behaviour, and ethics (De Backer & Vyncke, 2005).

Gossip is a phenomenon that many have labelled as bad. Every time someone mentions the word “gossip”, people certainly conjure images of loose tongues and lips, vicious gossipers, and poor, helpless targets. The common perception of gossip places it in the negative, as evidenced by the terms “small talk”, “shop talk”, and “backstabbing”. Stereotyped as malicious and hurtful, gossip has been widely blamed for destroying reputations, severing relationships, and undermining morale (Chua & Uy, 2014).

Gossip is a topic of great interest to the average person on the street. Undoubtedly, much has been discussed about gossip, both in print sources and on the internet. Most popular writings on the subject are purely opinion-based and intended for entertainment. However, several works are intended for a lay audience that is firmly grounded in scholarship and that provide an easy-reading introduction to the world of gossip research. The available literature on the subject includes written scholarship (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007), documentary films, radio broadcasts, and online blogs. Most of these sources devote significant attention to the role of gossip in employee performance and organisational survival.

Gossip is an enigma. It can be a tool to build or destroy a reputation, or it can be the cohesive glue that holds a group together. It may even be the instrument used to banish an individual from a group entirely. It is only in the last twenty-five years or so that psychologists and other social scientists have turned their attention to the study of gossip, perhaps because the concept is fluid and, therefore, takes on different interpretations. This notwithstanding, most researchers agree that the practice involves talking about people who are not present and that this talk is relaxed, informal, and entertaining.

Some of the early (Allport & Postman, 1947; Shibutani, 1996; Rosnow & Fine, 1976) and subsequent (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2000) studies of gossip have demonstrated that gossip is not merely the result of faulty communication. Gossip is capable of transmitting news, building but also ruining reputations, and setting off riots and wars. Yet, the advent of newspapers, the radio, and most recently, the audiovisual explosion, has not smothered gossip. In spite of the great role of the media in disseminating information, the public continues to glean some of its information from word of mouth. The arrival on the scene of mass media, instead of suppressing talk, has merely made it more specialised. Each form of communication now has its own territory (Shibutani, 1996; Rosnow & Fine, 1976; DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007).

A challenge that almost every organisation faces in a crisis is the circulation of gossip, which, if not addressed, can cause significant reputational damage, and sometimes even more than the crisis itself. Gossip is particularly challenging be-

cause it is hard to figure out when something is stated, how it is building momentum, and when it might end. Once started, gossip can spread among employees, customers, suppliers, lenders, investors, and regulators. Gossips can feed one another, and when they hit the media, they are formalized and seen as an accurate representation of reality. If the gossip is about malfeasance or inappropriate activity, it commands a high level of credibility.

Gossip is employees' most frequent informal activity, especially in the last few decades. However, both seasoned and early-career administrators sometimes miss out on the benefits of its practice, resulting in an over-emphasis on its dangers (Alhassan, 2018). Over-emphasis on the dangers of gossip is not a recent phenomenon. This statement is boldly mentioned because the literature on gossip is flooded or skewed toward the damage that gossip can cause in an enterprise space. It is on this basis that we made this effort to explore and bring to the fore, a synopsis of how to turn gossip in the workplace into a springboard for productive behaviour.

In this paper, an overview of gossip is presented. This is followed by the functions of gossip in an enterprise space. The effects of both negative and positive gossip are also discussed extensively. Finally, we present recommendations on how to manage workplace gossip to engender a positive work climate.

## 2. Concept of Gossip

Where does the phenomenon known as “gossip” begin and where does it end? How is it different from “word of mouth”? In fact, the concept slips away when one believes that one has pinned it down. Everyone thinks that they can recognise gossip when they come across it, but few people have managed to provide a satisfactory definition of gossip. Generally, while everyone feels quite sure that gossip exists, there is no consensus on the delimitation of the phenomenon.

As reiterated earlier, the term “gossip” is fluid and thus endowed with several meanings. For some, it refers only to a malicious or actionable conversation about someone beyond that person's hearing; some believe it involves just untrue tales, while others think it can include truthful remarks. Still, others consider “gossip” to be any talk about a person's or institution's affairs, whether personal or professional, innocuous or slanderous. Gossip is defined as any casual form of communication, or “empty talk”, usually about a third party who is not present, and is generally considered negative (Grosser et al., 2010; Altunas et al., 2014). Kurland and Pelled (2000) defined gossip as informal evaluative talk about a person who is not present.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (1989), gossip is “easy, untrained talk or writing, especially about people or social incidents”. Almost two-thirds of adult casual conversations are devoted to matters of social importance and can, therefore, be considered gossip (Levin & Arluke, 1985; Dunbar, 2004).

Gossip is sometimes described as a casual or idle talk between friends. Although many definitions are neutral, the term is often used with negative con-

notations, referring to the spread of malicious information, rumours from unreliable and unverified sources, and misinformation. Other negative associations with gossip include being trivial, invasive, and frequently harmful (Westacott, 2000). Several other authors also suggest generalising the concept of gossip to refer to “talking about other people”. The aim of this “neutralisation” of the term is to be able to identify instances in which talking about other people becomes problematic.

Gossip is the process of informally communicating value-laden information about members of a social setting who may be present. The communication typically contains an undertone or an assumption of secrecy or privacy. The communication has a positive, negative, or neutral message about gossip. It is worth noting that gossip can also be about oneself; people frequently gossip about their own personal problems to others.

Workplace gossip usually occurs when formal communication between employers and employees is poor or dysfunctional (Altunas et al., 2014). We can easily gauge whether an organisation is successful in staff management and communication or not via the amount of rumour and gossip during ambiguous times of change (promotions, transfers, intense crises, etc.) (Farley et al., 2010).

### 3. Functions of Gossip in Organisations

As modern organisations are facing complex and turbulent environments, effective communication has become particularly important, especially given the important role that communication plays in an organisation’s survival. Increasing scholarly attention has been given to the types of communication, resulting in the discovery of 2 main ones: the formal and informal, which can be found in virtually every organisation (Driskill & Goldstein, 1986). Formal communications involve the use of written policies, procedures, rules, formal authority, and duties, whereas informal communications include social communications and grapevine activities (Crampton et al., 1998).

Formal communication is important to an organisation as it is a tool used to improve productivity and job satisfaction while reducing conflict by reinforcing trust and overall satisfaction (Chio et al., 2004). Meanwhile, it has been suggested that informal communication is important to facilitate communication, improve trust, maintain cohesion, and ensure a sense of personal autonomy (Thomas et al., 2009). Although informal communication may be less rational than formal systems (Johnson, 1993), it is a natural consequence of human interaction and, thus, an inevitable part of organisational life (Baskin & Aronoff, 1989). Among various informal communication media, gossip is one of the most pervasive activities within organisations (Noon & Delbridge, 1993), and it usually occurs when a member engages in informal and evaluative conversations with a few other members about another member of that organisation who is not present (Kurland & Pelled, 2000). It is commonly referred to as idle talk, tittle-tattle, scandals, and rumours (Noon & Delbridge, 1993). These definitions seem to gain

support from the work of Alhassan (2018) when he noted that “gossip in the workplace involves discussing an employee’s private or official matter in which the participants in the gossip would not have been involved if the person or the subject of the gossip was present”.

Given that gossip often involves ignoring the facts, previous research has attempted to identify the outcomes of gossip. For example, in the conceptual model of gossip and power by Kurland and Pelled (2000), it is suggested that negative gossip increases the coercive power of the gossiper, while positive gossip increases the expert power of the gossiper. Kniffin and Wilson (2005) analysed gossip in a competitive sports team and discovered that gossip serves group-beneficial rules when rewards are partitioned at the group level on a scale that permits mutual monitoring.

Sommerfeld et al. (2008) examined the results of multiple gossip statements and found that gossip not only enhances cooperation within a group but also transfers reciprocity, trust, and reputation among group members. Using a case study approach in various industries, Kniffin and Wilson (2010) found that workplace-gossip can serve positive functions when organisational rewards are fairly distributed at the level of small-scale groups. Gossip enforces group norms essential to the group. Norms may be communicated by commenting on personally known figures such as celebrities and politicians. Gossip thus has a moral orientation; it is value-laden. It forms, maintains, enforces, or disseminates group norms. In this regard, gossip influences and controls attitudes and actions (Rosnow & Georgoudi, 1985: p. 212). More generally, gossip educates people on how to act effectively in complex social environments (Foster, 2004), especially through specific comparisons with the behaviour of real or imaginary others (Wert & Salovey, 2004).

In addition to the outcomes of gossip discussed above, several studies have sought to identify the antecedents of gossip. For example, McAndrew and Malenkovic (2002) examined the effect of gender on the likelihood of spreading gossip and found that both men and women were more interested in gossiping about others of the same-sex than about others of the opposite sex. Moreover, men were found to be more likely to confide in their romantic partners, whereas women were equally likely to share gossip with their lovers and same-sex friends. Parley et al. (2010) investigated perceptions of female gossipers in the workplace and found that high gossipers were perceived as having a greater need to exert control over others than low gossipers, and high gossipers were perceived as less emotionally warm than low gossipers. In a recent study by Mills (2010), gossip was suggested to be an integral part of sense-making and social exchange. More importantly, Mills (2010) asserts that gossip cannot be fully understood without the inclusion of formal processes and other forms of informal communication. Other antecedents identified to be predictors of gossip include the level of anxiety experienced (e.g. Rosnow, 1991), organisational climate (e.g. Crampton et al., 1998), and organisational change (e.g. DiFonzo & Bordia, 2000).

The social functions of gossip are recognised differently by people in various social situations. According to psychologists, people engage in the process of gossiping to build more intimacy with others, obtain information, and achieve power and entertainment. People tend to spread gossip by sharing their values and comparing their life experiences, feelings, and beliefs with others. According to [Sterling \(1956\)](#), gossip is an important social phenomenon that facilitates the flow of information, improves entertainment, and controls cohesion in groups. The literature review provides some information about the many functions of gossip, and among them, four main social functions stand out. These are information-sharing, entertainment, friendship, and penetration. **Table 1** summarises the functions and performance indicators of gossip from different perspectives.

The first social function of gossip is information-sharing or exchange. Gossip has been defined as an information-sharing mechanism and an efficient tool for fostering cultural learning. At the group level, people must have access to certain information that is difficult to obtain through direct communication ([Michelson & Mouly, 2002](#); [Wert & Salovey, 2004](#)). Therefore, people get the required information through gossip and escape from making any type of direct contact ([Foster, 2004](#)). The researcher believes that the uneven distribution of information improves the transfer of data through gossip and makes it worthwhile. Protecting the confidentiality of news sources, as well as the informality of interaction and dialogue between individuals, are two essential elements required for the spread of gossip ([Parker & O'Reilly, 2012](#)). Information is only provided to people who are trustworthy and who keep the source of information secret ([Ellwardt et al., 2012](#)).

[Beersma and Van Kleef \(2012\)](#) argued that gossip makes people enjoy their

**Table 1.** The functions and performance measures of gossips.

| Functions     | Performance Measures of Gossips  |
|---------------|--|
| Information   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collection of information through gossip, evaluating the issues, and making comparisons with themselves and others</li> <li>• Gossip is used as a means of motivation to make comparisons between the gossipers(s) and others to improve themselves</li> </ul>                                    |
| Entertainment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gossip reduces social isolation and discrimination through the creation of a sense of belonging</li> <li>• Gossips are used as a platform for reducing boredom</li> </ul>   |
| Friendship    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gossips cause a distinction between individuals, groups and oneself</li> <li>• Gossips create a real avenue for friendship</li> </ul>   |
| Penetration   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employees gain and increase their power of authority through gossiping and relating themselves more closely to top-level management</li> <li>• Penetration is a function of gossip by which people attempt to gather information and influence others to exploit it to their advantage</li> </ul> |

Source: Adopted and reviewed from [Aghbolagh et al. \(2021\)](#).

interactions and stated that entertainment is the second function of gossip. People use gossip as a tool for entertainment without much emphasis on convincing others or giving too much importance to the existing environmental conditions (Noon & Delbridge, 1993). Another way in which gossip builds group solidarity is by providing social entertainment (Rosnow & Fine, 1976; Litman & Pezzo, 2005). One could say that gossip works as a mutual mood enhancer—when people laugh at each other’s peccadilloes. They enjoy private information about someone else (Rosnow & Georgoudi, 1985); sharing such information helps pass the time.

The third social function of gossip is friendship. The exchange of gossip improves people’s mutual understanding and strengthens their relationships with each other; therefore, in terms of organisational behaviour, they interact with each other in the form of an informal group of friends (Houmanfar & Johnson, 2004). People communicate with each other on the basis of their views, norms, and culture. In the early stages of friendship, people begin sharing gossip, especially positive ones, with a minimum of acceptable trust, so they indirectly measure people’s trustworthiness, form friendship groups and create social boundaries between themselves and their environment if the process continues and trust increases (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007).

Penetration is the fourth social function of gossip, and it may be thought of as the control of other people’s thoughts, intentions and overall actions. In the analysis of significant behaviour, the verbal behaviour of the speaker affects the listeners’ performance. In other words, gossip plays a particular role in penetration (Houmanfar & Johnson, 2004).

### 3.1. Gossip as a Channel for the Dissemination of Information

Deductions from some gossip studies (Westacott, 2000; Michelson & Mouly, 2002; Shermer, 2004; De Backer, 2005) suggest that gossip is usually communicated through idle talk, often among friends and colleagues. Gossip is usually viewed as being negative because of its nature of being trivial, invasive, and commonly harmful (Crnkovic & Anokhina, 2010: p. 12). However, as noted earlier, several studies suggested neutralising and generalising the concept by referring to “any talk about other people” (Westacott, 2000; De Backer, 2005).

Gossip is a well-known phenomenon in all societies, both historical and contemporary (Crnkovic & Anokhina, 2010). It fulfils certain psychological and social functions, such as decreasing uncertainty and increasing social cohesion through sharing sensitive information. In the case of neutral talk about other people, it is obvious that everyone’s information about everyone else can be beneficial to a group of people.

Crnkovic and Anokhina (2010) claimed that employees gossip to gain information, influence others, and socialise. Gossip is seen as a communication process of unauthenticated information through which a sense-making function is used to understand ambiguous situations. Gossip activities would increase in a situa-

tion of environmental ambiguity (Rosnow, 2001), where employees have a low impact on decision-making and when policies and information may not be clear. Under such circumstances, gossip may decrease the feeling of uncertainty and anxiety levels in the organisation.

Michelson and Mouly (2002) viewed gossip as an information-sharing tool that helps employees socialise, strengthen social bonds, foster intimacy, and preserve group solidarity. This notion is also supported by Collins (1994), who re-evaluates the perceived view of gossip in order to balance the image of gossip as an entirely malicious, pointless, trivial, and inappropriate activity. Gossip enhances people's capacity to project themselves into new circumstances and learn about others, share their evaluations, and increase their self-understanding.

While gossip can facilitate the dissemination of information quickly, it is of little use if the information is incorrect or inaccurate. Gossip can fuel backbiting, sabotage, and relations between individuals or groups. Gossip generates powerful emotions that drain employees' time, motivation, attention, and energy. The work of the organisation takes second place in the drama of interpersonal relationships. If individuals are turning on each other, it probably won't be long before they turn on the organisation.

### 3.2. Gossip as an Organisational Communication

Given the strong face-to-face character of many organisational gossips, a conversational exchange perspective, rather than an information dissemination perspective, seems more suitable for the study of gossip (Guerin & Miyazaki, 2006). Such an approach would encourage the non-informational purposes of gossip, particularly the social ones proposed by scholars such as Rosnow (2001) and Hafen (2004), to be given greater prominence. Such a perspective is consistent with the findings here, which suggest that gossip is not necessarily experienced as an end in itself, but rather it fulfils other communication-related agendas such as having something to talk about and maintaining relationships in a conversational setting.

Mills (2010) posits that internal stakeholders in an organisation experience gossip as a highly contingent conversational exchange process where the focus, process, and intentionality vary with the situation, especially in terms of the succession phase of a Chief Executive Officer (CEO). According to Hafen (2004) and Mills (2010), no evidence of gossip occurring in isolation from other forms of communication was found. These findings challenge two traditions within the literature. Firstly, they question the appropriateness of distinguishing between formal and informal types of communication, such as gossip, and of assuming that one form can be studied and understood in isolation from the other. Secondly, the study also questions the tradition of trying to distinguish gossip from other forms of informal communication. They suggested that both of these bifurcations in the researcher's approach to organisational communication are at odds with the real-world experience of gossip and gossip spread.

Mills' (2010) study illustrated how the formal events within an organisation provide platforms for gossip if the right people are present, for instance, familiar and trusted co-workers. It seems that work-related activities bring people together and, in doing so; provide opportunities for conversations in which gossip can be shared (Mills, 2010: p. 234). Informal events and casual encounters, similarly, provide opportunities for gossip. Gossip seems to occur within the context of conversations due to the "people" nature of organisational life.

Whether gossip was integrated into a formal or informal conversation, the way this was done seemed to be linked to the perceived characteristics of others who participated in the conversation. Sensitive or negative gossip was reported to be shared only when there was sufficient familiarity and trust between the parties to ensure that the likelihood of negative outcomes for the person sharing the personal information was small (Mills, 2010; Ferrin et al., 2007). This is not surprising given that trust is recognised as one of the most important considerations in personal and group behaviour. What this means is that gossip needs to be understood in the context of the quality of the relationships of those engaged in it and its implications for the maintenance of these relationships.

From a relational perspective, Turner et al.'s (2003) findings suggest that gossip, particularly sensitive or negative gossip, should be viewed as contributing to and providing a measure of relationship quality. From an organisational change perspective, Mills (2010) suggested that the way gossip apparently changes in focus, process, and purpose across an organisational change could allow the progress of an organisational change to be monitored and strategised.

### 3.3. Gossip as Social Networking

Gossip performs several functions key to the formation and maintenance of social networks (Foster, 2004). First, gossip provides information about a complex social environment; it informs people about aspects of the group (Levin & Arluke, 1987). The workplace is a social environment, and people will talk about each other. Gossip can strengthen the bonds between people who work together, or it can destroy an individual or undermine a work team. Some organisations attempt to eliminate gossip, but it just goes underground. Other organisations maintain that employees' social conversations are none of their business and they let gossip go unchecked in the work environment. Healthy, dynamic, and strong organisations address the issue of gossip. These organisations provide leadership by teaching effective workplace communication skills, encouraging multi-faceted interactions between employees, and holding employees accountable for their workplace interpersonal behaviours.

Gossip is a vehicle that can be used to build connections between people and enhance individual and team relationships. As you gossip, you share your thoughts, ideas, feelings, and opinions on a particular topic or person. While you may be talking about other people, you are disclosing a great deal about yourself. The more people know about each other, the more likely they are to find com-

mon ground. When people know each other's strengths and interests, they have the opportunity to use this knowledge to optimise resources within the team. Thus, from the above explanation, we could deduce that gossip is all about the information gained through social interaction with other people. More generally, gossip has been proposed as information gained through observing the adventures and misadventures of others. It thus provides cultural information in a second-hand fashion (and then third, fourth, and fifth) (Baumeister et al., 2004: p. 112).

Another primary function of gossip is to define intimate boundaries and group membership, which agrees with social networking, ensuring that gossiping with another person would help members feel closer (Smith et al., 1999) or make them feel bonded. It has been argued that gossip is an efficient means of social bonding, enabling friendship groups to include many members (Dunbar, 2004). One knows that he or she is part of a social group when someone whispers some delightful inside information; one at least becomes an insider. One does not gossip with one's enemies but with friends. Thus, through gossip, people gain friendships and alliances.

Grosser et al. (2010) and Altunas et al. (2004) summarised the impact of gossip on social functioning and categorised them into the following:

- Collecting and disseminating information about individuals;
- Releasing with-held emotions, having a 'vent', serving as an emotional outlet and stress relief;
- Creating a sense of cohesion between people, strengthening bonds and connections;
- Feeling a sense of belonging to a group and encouraging socialising;
- Learning about expectations within an organisation and the behavioural norms;
- Entertainment via satisfying emotional needs and eliminating boredom;
- The need for self-enhancement.

#### **4. Negative Gossip and Its Effects at the Workplace**

It is not for nothing that the statement "whatever can be used for good, can also be used for evil" has become popular parlance in the social sciences. An important feature of gossip is this double-edged sword, which has both negative and positive effects. Among various forms of informal communication in organisations, gossip has received much attention as it is generally seen as a socially destructive activity (Grosser et al., 2010). Since gossip requires a group of individuals, the nature of relationships among these individuals could determine not only whether gossip is engaged but also what form of gossip is encouraged.

Excessive gossip in the workplace harms productivity, morale, and engagement. Over time, an organisation's turnover rate increases as high-performing employees become frustrated. Malicious gossip could even result in lawsuits against an organisation. An important part of the management role in organisa-

tional survival is shutting down negative gossip in the workplace before employees start to distrust each other, which can lead to a breakdown in communication and teamwork. Improve your management skills by understanding the problem and using some tips provided in this work to stop the spread of negative gossip.

Gossip can destroy the interpersonal trust that team members need to effectively work together. A person who gossips about others in negative ways erodes the goodwill among others and often creates defensiveness and hurt feelings. Some people gossip to build themselves up by putting others down. Gossip undermines productivity in numerous ways. Idle gossip may seem harmless on the surface, but it hurts the organisation by wasting time and diverting the focus of gossipers from the real work. Gossip can fuel backbiting, sabotage, and retaliation between individuals or groups. Gossip generates powerful emotions that drain employees' time, motivation, attention, and energy. The work of the organisation can take second place in the drama of interpersonal relationships. If individuals are turning on each other, it probably won't be long before they turn on the organisation as they look for a target for their unhappiness in the work environment.

Gossip can poison the work environment. When communication and workplace relationships are unhealthy, the individuals in the work environment also become unhealthy as they begin showing the symptoms of a stressful work climate. Even if some employees are not involved in the gossip, they are still impacted by the tension around them. In an unhealthy work environment, absenteeism due to casual illnesses and long-term disabilities will increase. Good employees will not tolerate a spiteful or destructive work climate for long. They soon quit and move elsewhere, or they find some other way to detach themselves from the toxic work environment.

Most of us are all too familiar with the hurtful and destructive characteristics of gossip. Gossip can be used as a weapon for competition in the workplace, conflict, or even personal vendetta. It can destroy a person's self-esteem or assassinate their character. Gossip can isolate a person from a group or divide a team. When people gossip, they often make inadvertent assumptions and convey more information than they know to be true. Misunderstandings are frequent because the spoken word is easily misunderstood. A person who gossips may overdo it to build his own sense of power, as he conveys very personal or key information. A gossipier may even outright lie to get on top of the competition, sabotage an individual or project, or destroy the credibility of a co-worker. Once a lie is told, it is very difficult to replace it with the truth; the impact lingers on for a long time.

Gossip cannot be eliminated from the workplace. If employees are prevented in some way from talking during work hours, they will talk after working hours. No matter what barrier an employer sets up, employees will find a way around it. Remember, gossip is a part of our human nature. If an organisation ignores

workplace-gossip in the belief that personal relationships and conversations are none of their business, they will do so at their own peril. Not only do organisations pay a price in terms of employee well-being and individual and team performance, but they are also responsible for the detrimental effects of gossip in the workplace. When gossip reaches the levels of bullying, character assassination, or illness due to the stress of the work environment, then there are problems. Organisations have a moral and legal responsibility to provide a work environment free from offensive behaviour and harassment. Harmful and unchecked, mean-spirited gossip can be considered both offensive and a form of harassment in the workplace.

When trying to avoid negative gossip at the workplace, both individuals and organisations have a responsibility to ensure that gossip does not have a detrimental impact on employees or the organisation. In this regard, Professor William Otoo Ellis, former Vice-Chancellor of the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology and Chairman of Vice-Chancellors Ghana, at a meeting held on Friday, February 13, 2015, with all categories of labour unions in public universities in Ghana, stated that “considering the size of my university, I manage the University based on gossips”. He stated clearly that gossips emanate when information does not flow directly to the beneficiaries. Based on this statement, here are some solutions to the workplace-gossip phenomenon.

## **5. Solutions to the Effects of Negative Gossip at the Workplace**

### **5.1. Individual Responsibility**

Each person is responsible for his or her communication and behaviour in the work environment. Before you open your mouth to say anything, ask yourself these 3 questions. Is it true? Is it kind? Is that helpful? These questions will help you think before you speak and will guide you in your decision-making process. If your organisation has fulfilled its responsibility, you will know how to answer these questions and you will be held accountable for what you say and do at work.

One must also remember that everyone gossips and people will gossip about you. Based on your words and behaviour, what do you think they will talk about you? When you evaluate your words and behaviour and it reflects who you are, you can consciously choose to emphasise your strengths and good qualities while you are working to become a better human being. Over a period, people get to know each other and everyone in a group. They can tell who is trustworthy, who exaggerates, who is supportive, who engages in backbiting, who lies, and who harbours evil intent. You, therefore, need to make a conscious effort to be positive in your interactions with others and not engage in damaging gossip.

Remember that people who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones. We all live in glass houses because we all have our weaknesses and failures. Your best

bet is to drop hurtful words like stones, smile in recognition of our common human frailty, act with kindness, respect, and compassion, and avoid gossip.

## 5.2. Organisational Responsibility

Healthy and effective organisations recognise the importance of values and understand that an organisation is only as good as its people. These organisations are very deliberate in creating a culture and maintaining a work climate that expresses the values of the company. Corporate values define how employees and customers are to be treated and how the work of the organisation is to be conducted. Leaders, or those in a position of power, have the responsibility to establish and monitor the culture and climate of the work environment. This means that the leaders must first agree on and then clearly communicate to their employees the values of the organisation. We are all value-driven, even though we may not have taken the time to look deep into our beliefs and behaviour and articulate these values.

When the leaders of an organisation recognise the power of gossip, they will actively use this tool to maximise the benefits, reduce liability, and minimise the cost of gossip in terms of employee well-being, effectiveness, and productivity. This can be achieved by deliberately articulating the desired values and expectations regarding employee communications; assisting employees in becoming aware of their expressed values; teaching effective, respectful, and responsible workplace communication skills; and implementing rewards and sanctions for workplace behaviour. Rewards for behaviour that actively contributes to supporting the expressed values of the organisation may include recognition, career advancement, and remuneration. Sanctions for behaviour that violates the expressed values of the organisation may include disciplinary action leading to termination of employment; reduced opportunities for career progression; and/or withholding of monetary rewards if there is a lack of willingness to correct behaviour.

Organisations can also communicate their value of maintaining a healthy team climate and work environment by conducting values clarification exercises with employee groups and connecting individual and corporate values and goals. People must be taught how to successfully contribute to a corporate environment. Organisations would do well to actively teach employees the responsibilities of effective group membership, as well as to teach personal leadership skills.

## 6. How to Manage Gossip to Engender a Positive Work-Climate

While gossip cannot be completely eliminated, however, there are many steps employers can consider taking when striving for a healthier and happier workplace in the midst of gossip. Gossip in public and corporate life illustrates that power is not possessed by people but exercised by them through the use of the right strategies and tactics. Gossip is a strategy of power and resistance. To avoid its negative ef-

fects on public and professional life, one should also be creative and think about ways to counteract gossip and turn these occasions into occasions for personal and professional growth in an enterprise space. Therefore, one must have a clear, frequent, and formal meeting to communicate the ongoing activities within the organisation.

As it has been said that gossip increases during times of ambiguous change within the workplace, it is important to fully inform employees of new changes and keep the door open for people to express their concerns or opinions (Grosser et al., 2010; Altunas et al., 2014). Gossip may be heightened when employees' concerns are not considered in the organisation-wide decision-making process.

Create a culture of civility in the work environment. Incivility is the practice of adopting inconsiderate conversations that go against workplace values and norms. It is when an individual has bad manners and lacks compassion toward other people. Some examples of incivility are being condescending toward others, blaming others for your own mistakes, and throwing tantrums when you don't get your way. These habits can easily spread throughout an organisation.

Establish professional development goals and plans for all employee groups. Employers can motivate their employees to set challenging goals to keep them happy and focused in their role, feeling that they are moving forward and aren't stagnant. If employees aren't feeling this way, they are inclined to talk to their colleagues about the problems they are having in their role. It is recommended to set realistic goals and review individual performance to keep everyone on the same page and to progress the workforce further. While doing this, it is important to focus, predominantly, on the strengths of employees and build confidence and contentment. If problematic behaviour is discussed, it is vital to comment and focus on the behaviour itself, not on the individual.

Sharing individual and team wins encourages positive gossip in the workplace. Positive gossip reinforces strong team bonds and improves morale. Employees feel proud of the work they have completed and enjoy the recognition for their professional achievements. Set aside time at staff meetings and allow employees to share positive gossip. Public sharing encourages team building and creates a cycle of positive behaviour. Employees feel motivated to achieve the company's goals. Although money is a strong motivator, public praise can also be equally rewarding for some people.

Use gossip as constructive feedback to improve the work environment and culture. Gossip can be interpreted as constructive feedback to improve employees' work attitudes. If the source of the gossip is your physical and personal traits, the solution is within your reach. Gossip can also be defined as constructive criticism from others regarding some undesirable personality trait(s). Seek redress from appropriate quarters with demonstrable professionalism and listen to constructive gossip. Do something to change this gossip into a means to achieve admiration and social acceptance.

Provide frequent, clear, and convincing information to employees. Gossips are

most likely to spread when there is no clear and frequent communication between management and employees. Gossip thrives in situations of uncertainty, doubt, and utter lack of information. Thus, one of the best ways to counter gossip is to provide clear, frequent, and convincing information about the personal or public matter being discussed in order that people will not further speculate on and imagine unrealistic happenings to illuminate their ignorance or lack of knowledge.

Reshuffle employees to minimise the influence of power cliques. If the corporate culture is personalistic, politicized, and colonized, where merit is subordinated to social ties, and regulatory and policy enforcement drives are frustrated, then influential power groups among employees and managers will compete to control the organisation's resources, and "hand-picking" of favourites is sure to rise. The group that has more allies or connections with top management would emerge as the hegemonic or most powerful group. Within a department of an organisation, power cliques can also arise. These cliques would usually use gossip as a tool to undermine the system, their competitors, or whoever stood in their way of advancing the interests of their group. The task for administrators is to identify these power cliques and their leaders and to break their control and network. To minimise the negative impact of such colonies on the achievement of the organisation's goals, the administrator must re-assign or reshuffle the prominent members of the cliques, ensuring that such networks in the organisation can no longer bite.

## 7. Conclusion

As noted above, we provided realistic and feasible suggestions on how to turn gossip in the workplace into a springboard for productive behaviour, which we have discussed at length.

We conclude that as long as man remains a social being and gossip is a social activity, then everyone has a propensity to gossip. Gossip is inevitable, but what makes gossip thrive is not merely the social nature of man; rather, it is the social support that gossip gets from the group or network with which it is shared. Refusing to respond to gossip and effectively denying any social support is the surest way to stop gossip in its tracks. While the "soul" of gossip is in a person's self-concept, his "heart" is in the social support he receives.

A take-home message from us to administrators with respect to how to avoid gossip in the workplace is for them (administrators) to live a morally honest and upright life. People with many vices and hidden transgressions are prone to gossip. Just do your duty efficiently and be friendly to all in the workplace. Also, be generous to people, not just your friends in the organisation. Treat everyone equally and with the respect that they deserve. Generally, all things being equal, people "don't bite the hands that feed them" or create gossip about their benefactors or the people who care for them. Be friendly with your enemies and find ways of making them your friends.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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