

Psst! Do you know what she told me?

THE BOSS OF A PR COMPANY IN CHICAGO HAS BANNED GOSSIP IN THE OFFICE – IF YOU'VE CAUGHT YOU'RE SACKED. HARSH MAYBE, BUT IS GOSSIP REALLY DAMAGING FOR BUSI-

We all love gossip – who's made the latest mistake, who's got the hots for whom, who's

about to be promoted... a little bit of tittle tattle can make the day more interesting. But is it just harmless fun?

According to Denise Taylor, career psychologist, it can be bad, but it can also serve a purpose. 'Gossip is generally seen as harmful but in some cases it can be constructive, such as when it helps you find out that your company is in difficulties and you need to sort out your CV so you can apply for a new job,' she says.

One of the primary functions is bonding with your colleagues and usually that's harmless. It's a chance for people to let off steam about a mutual subject and is more about the group who is gossiping than the person they are talking about. It's a way of sharing information and helps you to relate to other people too. By gossiping with them you show a certain level of trust and it can help you connect. This is only when what you are saying is not bullying though.

It's important to be wary of gossip too. The American Psychological Association published a study about the 'boomerang effect of gossip.' This is when you say negative comments about someone and the person you are telling may think similar, negative comments about you. This is called 'spontaneous trait transference'. Haven't you had that moment when someone is slating someone else and you're thinking: 'Well you're not that great yourself, love.'

When it's not so clever

Denise cites four gossip no-no's – this is when it stops being fun and

starts being detrimental to you or the person you are gossiping about. These are:

- When it's malicious.
- If you're sharing personal details that you aren't certain the person you're talking about would want other people to hear.
- When we say negative things about others it can actually make us experience stress symptoms and so affects our own health.
- When someone has confided in us and then we share their secrets. This can bring on feelings of guilt that we've let them down.

Once gossip starts it always spreads faster than wildfire and even if it started out being relatively harmless, it can end up morphing into something else, like Chinese whispers. It could be about a person's work or reputation and once that is tainted it can be difficult for other people to shake off that view. And that can sometimes lead to careers being damaged and promotions being overlooked.

Malicious gossip means the person being talked about starts being excluded and becomes an outsider and that's when it becomes bullying. You'll find that there are some people in the office who thrive on it – manipulative people can get a thrill just from knowing that someone's life is being affected by gossip while others may think that, because they are in 'the know', about others it gives them a certain status.

Gossiping candidates

In *The Apprentice* there has been much bitching and gossiping. After the ice-cream task in week five Helene was accused by Lucinda of bitching about Jennifer behind her back, calling her lazy and incompetent. Helene hotly



Are you the office gossip?

'Sometimes you need to ask yourself, am I gossiping?,' says Denise Taylor, a career psychologist.

'How you can tell is if you would still say what you are saying if the person you are talking about was in the room. If you wouldn't mind them being there, then it's not harmful. And if what you are saying is malicious or disrespectful and you get caught it can create problems with your working relationship with that person, which could be damaging for your career and your reputation.'

denied this, but it didn't look good on the messenger, or the alleged perpetrator. Keep it zipped girls!

Just turn your back

It's also possible to become caught up in someone else's rant and end up standing there like a lemon, nodding your head. Denise warns that you must act on these occasions, as this can come back to haunt you.

'It can happen that you are simply standing with a person who is starting to dole out malicious gossip and you don't move away. It is then that people will think you agree. If you don't want to be tarred with the same brush then the best thing to do is walk away and say nothing, otherwise the gossip may bring it up again later on and because you didn't say anything, could well argue that you agree with her. You don't really have any come back to that because you didn't say anything at the time.'

Use it for your own ends...

Gossip can be useful when things that are going on may affect your job or your position.

- To hear rumours about possible redundancies for instance. Rumours can also tell us who is in trouble with the boss, who is pregnant – but it's important to find out the facts first as some rumours aren't truthful.

- To build relationships, but not if you pass on malicious information. It has to be 'light' gossip such as: 'did you know that Jo is transferring to the organisational change team?' Or 'have you heard that Chris has got a lead role in the local play?'

- You can use gossip to your advantage – if you have had a success and don't want to be seen as bragging you could tell someone and let them spread the word. 'If you have won an award or had some success in the workplace, but you don't want to brag, then mention it to the office gossip in confidence and that way it will get around to other people. It's a positive way of using gossip to your advantage,' says Denise.

Blanket ban

While many think gossip should be banned, Denise says it's here to stay.

'You can't ban gossip in the office – how will you know if your staff is gossiping and how do you monitor it? If you tell people not to do something they're more likely to do it anyway. Workers are selling their time, not their subconscious mind. It's much better to offer carrots, not sticks to employees or they will start to resent you', explains Denise.

To contact Denise Taylor go to www.amazingpeople.co.uk □