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Scuttle the Scuttlebutt

It's called idle talk, hearsay, grapevine, scuttlebutt, rumor, dirt, slander, scandal. Have you heard the scoop or the latest? By any name, it's still gossip, and it's all ugly. It's easy for gossip to get started in an organization, and even harder to stop it. Once gossip starts, it quickly destroys group morale and damages friendships and reputations. If gossip threatens your organization, try these strategies to get your group back on track.

Prevent it.

The obligation to prevent gossip belongs both to the person who speaks gossip and the person who listens to gossip. Good members show loyalty and friendship by refusing to listen to or spread gossip, so do not permit insinuations or negative discussion at all.

How can you do this politely?

* If a member begins to repeat a story about someone, politely say that you would prefer to talk about that person when she is present. Alternatively, listen politely, but do not comment, then change the subject as soon as possible, and do not repeat the information to anyone else.

* If someone confides personal information to you, keep it to yourself.

* Keep business meetings strictly business.

* Finally, because many rumors begin from miscommunication, keep your members informed about every aspect of the organization so that gossip has no chance to start.

Ignore it.

Sometimes rumors get started despite the best prevention methods. In that case, the best way to defuse gossip is to ignore it. Even though it may be difficult to ignore untruths spoken about you, and even though your first reaction may be indignation and righteous anger, actually the best response is no response at all. If gossip is directed at you, show people that the rumors are not affecting you; otherwise, you may be perceived as weak.

Instead of lashing out defensively, continue with your agenda with a patent disregard to the talk. If you know you are right, gossip will not really matter because your good reputation will overcome it.

Confront it.

Decide whether confronting the lies will make them go away or cause you to waste time answering accusations. If you decide to face the accusations, you need to ascertain if you should confront the group as a whole or just the source. By privately talking with the source of the gossip--if you know who it is--you might get at the root of the problem without causing more damage. If so, remain calm and detached during the conversation, and do not accuse.

Even if you feel that you need to confront a group of critics, be calm and concise in your response. Although getting the gossip out in the open could relieve tension in the group, you risk inadvertently escalating the problem and inviting more accusations and negative comments. Perhaps simply state that you are aware of what is being said about you and that it is sad how the truth gets so distorted. Then do not say anything else, and do not go into any justification at all.

Minimize the damage.

If gossip has gone beyond prevention and you cannot stop it, try to minimize the damage. Choose to respond to the criticism in positive and proactive ways. For a large organization, perhaps call an open forum to discuss the problem at the root of the rumor, find a solution and get past all the negativity. On the other hand, sometimes misinformation due to lack of communication may be the cause of all the trouble. In that case, increase your availability to members, or foster better communication through various venues such as a regular newsletter, email forum and web site.

Whether you are a group leader or group member, don't let gossip cause you to waste time when you need to focus on enjoying your group or completing a project. Remember, the best way to handle gossip is to avoid it as much as you can and then ignore the rest.