

**Are you engaged in workplace violence? No.
Are you sure?**

To many folks, the idea of “workplace violence” connotes the physical harm that one may do to another. However, there is another form of workplace violence that is as dangerous and insidious, and this is workplace gossip.

Gossip is any language that would cause another harm, pain, or confusion that is used outside the presence of another for whom it is intended.

As a facilitator, trainer and business coach, I’ve experienced numerous workplace situations where gossip was a norm. Curiously enough, in these same organizations, most folks would say they were “against” it.

Even more, in these same situations, after formal meetings to discuss the “gossip issue,” after sensitivity workshops designed to reduce and eliminate pernicious gossip, after mandating “there be no more gossip…” and after pledging to have more honest, open and direct communication (wherein folks verbalized their “commitment” to speak directly to a colleague, in order to eliminate the “gossip problem,”) many of these same committed folks consciously choose to continue to engage in the practice of gossip.

Why?

LANGUAGE OFFENSIVE

Gossip is essentially a form of attack, which often arises from an individual’s conscious and unconscious fears. For some people, their ostensible commitment “not to gossip” is easily lost in their fears, anxieties, or concerns about what their life might be like if they stopped gossiping. (e.g., “Who would I be then?” “What would I do then?” “How would I be one of the guys…?” “Would I have to eat lunch alone?” “Would I lose all my friends?”)

Some broader definitions of gossip not only relate to “negative” remarks, but even extend to “positive” or “neutral” remarks that are focused on making conversation that is centered on the activities/behaviors of others, again, outside the presence of that person.

Stopping the practice of “talking about others” is challenging for many. Why? Many folks just can’t be authentic in life. So, many revert to the self-defense mechanism of gossiping, which is a defense mechanism or self-protection device they use to so they never have to “show up”, or be vulnerable, or disclose information about their feelings or emotions, or “open up”.

For these folks, gossiping is a strategy for protecting against revealing one’s real or true self. These folks have walked around for so long wearing masks and assuming false identities, that opening up and revealing who they really, really are is just downright frightening and threatening.

So, one’s inner desire to be authentic and sincere, and not gossip, needs to emerge from a person’s deep sense of integrity, and from a conscious, heart-felt desire to be harmless in the context of their life and in their interactions with others.

FIRST OF ALL, DO NO HARM

Without this profound inner commitment to harmlessness, an injunction to “stop gossiping”, for example, is simply an “outer” induced rule or policy that can often bring up ego-based behaviors in reaction to the “rule.” So, one continues to find “excuses” (since there’s never a “reason”) to gossip.

From this outer perspective toward gossiping, some people may take on the role of being an enforcer of the rule; others may not want to “enforce” the rule because they don’t wish to be perceived as too assertive, too aggressive, too pushy, or too tough when they call others on their gossiping. In addition, others may not want to be identified as a “do-gooder”, “crusader”, or “spiritual” etc.

In addition, there are those folks who want or need to be liked and accepted, and who want or need others to feel comfortable with them, and so they often continue to engage in the gossip when approached. Why? They don't want to feel like the "odd one out." So, at the end of the day (and throughout the day!), the commitment not to gossip often dissipates rather quickly over time.

Or, someone may be "upholding the rule" outwardly, but still be gossiping in their thoughts, still sending out hostile vibrations, and just being "quiet" about it. Often, this covert behavior is even more dangerous and insidious.

Gossip is a fear-based behavior and so one's need for self-protection (i.e., not "show up" authentically) is often greater than one's initial commitment "not to gossip." The self-protection brings a kind of pseudo safety and false sense of well-being that might otherwise be in jeopardy; so one continues to gossip to keep the focus on "someone else, not me."

UNCONSCIOUS BEHAVIOR

For other folks, the issue is not so much that they're consciously being self-protective; it's when they DON'T KNOW they are being self-protective that is critical, and thus, many people are unable to take self-responsibility for their behavior. As a result, many folks begin to look outside themselves (blame, find fault, complain, whine...) when they fail to take responsibility for themselves, as they don't have the awareness to go inside to explore "what's up." So, they gossip and look to find some "reason", out there, to gossip.

Unless we truly explore our inner behavior (mental models, self-images, ego constructs, super-ego judgments, attendant beliefs, feelings and emotions), we cannot be free from both the urge and the habit of gossip.

We can stop gossiping in the workplace only when an inner desire emerges from a deep sense of integrity and authenticity, and a conscious desire to be harmless in the context of our life and in our interactions with others.

Gossip is a form of workplace violence. To be free from inflicting this violence on others we need to explore and heal the split between our outer self and inner self. Only then can we live honest, sincere and responsible lives in the workplace, and out.

HOW TO COACH YOURSELF ABOUT GOSSIPING:

Why am I engaging in gossiping or supporting others who do so?

What does gossiping get me?

Is there another way to get this same result without harming another?

Does gossiping align with my personal and my organization's espoused values around respecting and honoring people?

Would I repeat this gossip directly to the person it's about?

Would I want to be quoted on TV or in the papers or in the company newsletter?

Would I encourage my children to engage in the behavior of gossip?

Would I engage in it if it were about a relative or personal friend?

Am I expressing my authenticity, sincerity, and integrity when I gossip?

Does gossiping match my commitments to my self and others?

Do I feel ethical when I'm gossiping?

(c) 2012, Peter G. Vajda, Ph.D. and True North Partnering. All rights in all media reserved. You may reprint this article as long as the article is printed in its entirety, including the author's information

Peter G. Vajda, Ph.D, C.P.C. is the founder of True North Partnering an Atlanta-based company that supports conscious living through coaching and facilitating. With a practice based on the dynamic intersection of mind, body, emotion and spirit, Peter's approach focuses on personal, business, relational and spiritual coaching. He is a professional speaker

and published author. For more information, www.truenorthpartnering.com, or pvajda(at)truenorthpartnering.com, or phone 770.804.9125. You can also follow Peter on Twitter: @petergvajda