

## Key Points

**Gossip is malicious editorializing on grapevine news  
It can disrupt workplace, create agency liability  
Worst cases should be handled by discipline**

### Workplace gossip is dark side of grapevine

By Herb Levine, [cyberFEDS®](#) Correspondent

We've all heard something through the grapevine at one point or another, and probably contributed to it, if only by passing on what we hear.

The grapevine, the back channel for distributing news, exists in every workplace, said Robbie Kunreuther, director of Government Personnel Services, a training firm in Seattle. It is inevitable, and in itself a healthy form of communication.

But in the shadow of the grapevine is its dark side -- gossip. Gossip is not news, Kunreuther said, it is malicious editorializing on the news, and it may require supervisors to take action.

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### Gossip victimizes

Gossip, the way Kunreuther uses it, is always understood as a negative term. It generally targets individual and group victims. Although it takes advantage of the grapevine as a source of news, it twists that news for malicious purposes.

For example, the grapevine may pass on the word that Suzy is getting the next promotion in the unit, even before the supervisor makes the announcement. Gossip, said Kunreuther, would editorialize and add, "probably because of those great legs."

Gossip in the workplace, Kunreuther said, "just as in high school," often results in taking sides and ganging up on or isolating people. It may be intended to sway people against a target. The result of gossip is often a "hostile work environment," Kunreuther said, and whether it meets the legal definition used in EEO law or not, "it certainly feels hostile."

### Supervisory intervention

The supervisor needs to take action, Kunreuther said, "when people's work is affected." Workplace hostility, fueled by gossip, disrupts trust, distracts people from their jobs, and may affect the authority of the supervisor. Kunreuther pointed out that a frequent topic of gossip is whether the supervisor is playing favorites, who the favorites are, and what the reasons for the favoritism might be (see the above example of Suzy's legs).

Gossip can also create liability issues, especially when discriminatory harassment may be involved. Kunreuther noted that e-mail gossip is common and action is rarely taken against it, although it is a form of computer misuse. E-mail gossip may well wind up as evidence in EEO or other workplace investigations. Even ordinary conversational gossip may turn out to be evidence in an investigation, through witness statements.

If the supervisor does not take action once he is aware of the gossip, there is the possibility of agency liability.

### **What can the supervisor do?**

Supervisors may be aware of damaging gossip in their work units, but what can they do about it, beyond the obvious course of modeling acceptable behavior themselves?

Kunreuther recommends they begin by taking involved employees aside and talking to them individually, not as a group. The supervisor should say something to each employee like, "I know that this is going on. It is beneath you. Stop it."

Kunreuther suggests giving supervisors a bit of old-fashioned HR advice: "If your sixth sense tells you this may come back around, document it. If you don't have a sixth sense, document everything."

### **Discipline**

Gossip in its most malicious form can be the subject of discipline, Kunreuther said, and many agency tables of penalties have charges that would fit. He noted it is irrelevant whether gossip is "true or untrue." Discipline is an administrative matter, he said, not a criminal charge such as libel. For discipline, the only relevant question is whether the conduct has a negative effect on the efficiency of the service, to be proved by a preponderance of the evidence.

But whatever other charges might be used, Kunreuther recommends sticking to the simplest one to prove: failure to follow instructions. If a supervisor gives an employee documented notice to cut out the gossip, and if the employee is afterward shown to have disregarded those instructions, there exist good grounds for discipline.

**The bottom line:** Gossip in general, like the grapevine on which it feeds, is probably inevitable, and supervisors can't expect to wipe it out. What they can do is put employees on notice that particularly harmful gossip is off limits, and that those who persist will be disciplined.

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