



Between you and me – gossip and workplace conflict.

Just as conflict is a part of our lives and unavoidable, so is gossip in the workplace. “*Between you and me*” conversations might end up being between you and others resulting in misunderstanding and harmful gossip.

Not all gossip is harmful. Often gossip can be used to build alliances and relationships. Gossip may also cause low morale, curb efficiency and create an unhealthy climate in the workplace. As part of its outreach programme, the Office of the Ombudsman visits various offices in the field and during these visits it becomes apparent that each Office has a different tolerance level when it comes to Office gossip. What is even more apparent during some of the Ombudsman’s visits is that an Office that is crippled by interpersonal conflict is also often victim of pernicious gossip. Such gossip not only affects staff morale but also causes additional stress and associated health concerns to the primary parties involved in the conflict.

It can be a challenge to deal with gossip especially when it fuels conflict in the workplace. Often directly responding leads to even more gossip and ends up making a very difficult situation much worse. What can the Office of the Ombudsman do to help if you are affected by

harmful gossip in the workplace? A person affected by gossip feels crippled and stunted by the whole experience. Coming to the office everyday becomes a traumatic experience. This person is also often focussed on setting the matter the straight, and adamant about letting everyone know what the truth is and who is wrong. The Ombudsman’s office is a safe space. It offers those who visit it a fresh outlook and more importantly a neutral and independent perspective. Exploring different approaches, coaching for difficult conversations, serving as a sparring partner are only some of the ways which the Ombudsman uses to help those dealing with harmful gossip.

Another related aspect about harmful gossip is that it is often tied to concerns about professional reputation and competence. Those who are affected by gossip are often worried about how rumour and gossip will affect their reputation and career prospects within the organization. In such situations, a visitor to an Ombudsman’s Office examines each and every career related concern with an Ombudsman professional. Not all concerns will have immediate solutions. Dealing with harmful gossip often requires patience and persistence. Some gossip concerns may be addressed with a

simple reminder from management of the importance of transparency in office culture and practice. Harmful gossip may also be addressed through a team building exercise or a retreat focussing on the underlying values of the organization. Other gossip concerns might be more complex and require a more micro managed approach before the visitor has any confidence that his or her professional reputation is unaffected by the adverse effects of harmful gossip. Either way it helps to talk with an expert listener and often, those who do, find that it leads to a more responsible and measured response. Unaddressed gossip is often worse than the effects of harmful gossip. The Office of the Ombudsman understands this and encourages those affected or dealing with gossip to consider approaching our Office.