

Practice Management

Workplace Gossip in Urgent Care: The Impact of Toxic Talk

Urgent message: Malicious gossip in an urgent care center can undermine trust, service, and teamwork. Knowing how to spot toxic talk is the first step to rooting it out before it takes hold.

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What's the harm in a little workplace gossip? Well, consider what happens when a billing manager opines that an operations manager "slept" her way into a job. Or, when a new executive tells a staff member that he intends to replace his supervisor with a colleague from a previous job. Or, when a medical director repeatedly exclaims that one of the center's providers is incompetent. Or, finally, when a medical assistant—reviewing patient charts—uncovers a prescription written for a manager and shares her discovery with the front office staff.

Think a little gossip is harmless? Well, the harm is in undermining a medical professional's clinical credibility, personal reputation, and management authority. Gossip also fosters suspicion and hostility among co-workers and between managers and staff, potentially leading to hiring, firing, promotion, and pay raises based on factors irrelevant to performance. Gossip shifts staff attention from delivering an excellent patient experience to entertaining petty internal concerns. It robs "unpopular" employees of their dignity. And, it sets up an urgent care operation for litigation.

Gossip is toxic and it will work from within to destroy any organization where it's present. Gossip creates cultures where hard work, productivity, merit, loyalty and passion for the business are usurped by politics, favoritism, and game-playing—creating an overall atmosphere of uncertainty and stress.

So, the faster you take steps to identify and root out gossip—replacing it with a culture of trust, service and



teamwork—the more successful your operation can be.

Malicious Gossip is the Problem

Workplace gossip remains a somewhat ambiguous topic because the term "gossip" encompasses a continuum of human communication. As "chit-chat" or "small talk" about neutral topics, gossip can help workers bond and feel part of a group. "Grapevine" communications can also bring clarity and certainty when employees have questions or concerns. But when the tone of gossip turns neg-

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Strong professional relationships are as vital to patient treatment as medication, because patients can sense when there's an undercurrent of tension.

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ative and becomes infused with ill will, when it's used to manipulate others, or when its purpose is to advance a personal non-business agenda, gossip crosses the line and becomes "malicious." It's malicious gossip that is so damaging to individuals and to organizations.

"Malicious gossip" bears a striking resemblance to a complaint—about a co-worker, manager or practice within the workplace—but is said to someone without power to

do anything about it. Signs of malicious gossip include:

- Talk that creates conflict or keeps conflict alive;
- Criticism of people who are not present (and thus are unable to defend themselves);
- Conversation that can potentially hurt, embarrass or damage someone, whether he or she is present or not; and
- Conversation about a person that would not occur if that person were present.

Notice that the "truth" of what is said is not a factor in determining whether gossip is malicious. Rather, it's the intent, subject matter, and tone that are important. Some of the basic reasons that employees gossip maliciously are that they:

- Have no other way to resolve conflict either with coworkers or with the organization;
- Are not comfortable going to managers with problems;
- Are not getting important information about their work situation; and
- Are bored.

Managers or employees may gossip maliciously because they:

- Want to make themselves feel important;
- Want to manipulate people and opinions for their own gain; or
- Want to gain control within the organization

Occasional malicious gossip can occur in any organization, but urgent care centers are especially vulnerable because of their unique operating environment. Urgent care centers are typically small- to mid-sized operations where staff works in close proximity. As a result, management typically disseminates information verbally and informally instead of relying on structured, formal

communication channels. Urgent care is a "people" business—as opposed to working with data or materials, medical services are performed on "people"—not by systems and machines but rather, by other "people." By definition, urgent care centers are "social" workplaces. Whenever people are in close proximity in a social environment, they will talk.

The walk-in model of urgent care results in ebbs in patient flow that can lead to

times of intense stress followed by "idle" times that enable non-productive talk. Stress is magnified by the fact that staff members must maintain a professional and optimistic front when working with patients.¹ In addition, many of the administrative jobs in urgent care centers are repetitive and boring. Because "talk" can provide a reprieve from job-related stress while stimulating the imagination, the social urgent care environment seems to be the perfect incubator for workplace gossip.

Despite all the seemingly legitimate reasons why gossip occurs in urgent care settings, the centers most susceptible to gossip are those in which gossip is *condoned by management*.

Adverse Impact of Gossip on Employees

Employees who are the subject of negative gossip find it difficult to establish cooperative working relationships with colleagues and tend to leave organizations sooner than if gossip were not present.² High turnover has implications for service consistency, productivity, and costs associated with staff recruitment and training. Workplace ostracism (a byproduct of workplace gossip) has been found to negatively impact customer service,³ which can impact patient perceptions, repeat business, and word-of-mouth. Urgent care centers cannot thrive with a bad reputation in the community.

Naturally gossip wastes time that could be spent on more valuable activities, but more importantly, it depletes employee morale and is adverse to feelings of well-being.⁴ The effects of gossip go well beyond "hurt feelings." Malicious gossip can affect personal health through loss of sleep, eating disorders, substance abuse, and diminished family relationships. Where gossip thrives, health care costs and absenteeism go up and pro-

Table 1: Potential Legal Risks of Gossip	
Revealing Personal Information	Employees who have access to confidential personnel records and who tell other people about information in those records may be found to have invaded the privacy of the person whose information was disclosed. The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) limits access to personal medical information. In a healthcare setting, gossip about a patient’s medical condition or treatment can violate the patient’s rights under HIPAA.
Sexual Harassment	Employers are required by federal law to eliminate all forms of sexual harassment. According to the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), this includes: “Gossip regarding an individual’s sex life, comments on an individual’s body, comments about an individual’s sexual activity, deficiencies, or prowess, or other lewd or obscene comments.”
Defamation of Character	Malicious gossip in the workplace may lead to a claim for defamation. To state a claim for defamation <i>per se</i> , the plaintiff must show the intentional publication of a statement of fact that is false, unprivileged and has a natural tendency to injure or which causes special damage. ⁸
Workplace Bullying	An employee who spreads information about another employee in order to hurt that person or who tells lies about a coworker can be considered a workplace bully. The bully attempts to gain power by alienating other people. ⁹

ductivity goes down. Gossip isn’t just “idle” chatter—it can be more precise and destructive than a bullet.

Malicious gossip also destroys reputations and careers. It’s hard enough for employees to hear co-workers circulating untruths about their personal lives, but when critical comments about professional skills get repeated, victims could lose their ability to earn a living. Given the choice between two candidates, a hiring board or promotions panel may bypass the one they’ve “heard some bad things about” without investigating whether that information was true or not.

Adverse Impact of Gossip on Organizational Effectiveness

At its most innocent, time spent talking about other people and speculating about business issues is time spent not working. The cost of this misused time can be measured in the hundreds of dollars but the greater organizational costs of malicious gossip can be in the thousands or millions. Ultimately, gossip can cost a business owner his or her entire investment.

It’s been suggested that negative gossip is used to socially control (or sanction) uncooperative behavior in groups. After all, it becomes much easier to refuse to follow a safety policy or abide by a physician’s instructions, for instance, if everyone else is refusing to do so. In a workplace where gossip goes unchecked, individuals often cooperate with subversive group norms because they fear being gossiped about if they don’t.⁵

Malicious gossip is the polar opposite of effective communication. Unhealthy organizations allow gossip

because it circumvents the need for difficult conversations. In this way, gossip undermines formal channels of communication by offering an alternative, albeit untrustworthy, source of information.

Because managers cannot control the “grapevine,” workplace gossip has the ability to undermine a manager’s authority,⁶ affecting his or her ability to direct staff and affect organizational outcomes. One study found that low-status employees were able to exert collective power over management by the nature of their gossip, subsequently diminishing their managers’ reputations.⁷ How does a business owner or hired manager control the operation if, in the staff’s mind, he or she has no “authority” to do so?

Gossip undermines trust and the ability to work together as a team. When gossip is prevalent workers start to wonder what their peers are saying about them behind their backs. When management does not provide timely and accurate information about issues that affect the business, employees do not know what and whom to trust. They become distracted from their jobs and assume the worst. Resentment surfaces.

Without trust and teamwork, the work environment turns toxic. Morale declines, dissatisfaction increases. Employees who have been injured by gossip or who do not like working in a toxic environment leave, taking with them their training, skills, and knowledge of the operation’s processes, systems, contracts, and clients. Productivity and quality of service suffer. The organization decays from within.

How Gossip Increases Legal Risk

Managers who do not effectively address the problem of malicious gossip expose themselves and their organizations to legal liability. When gossip escalates into bullying, harassment, or defamation, the organization faces legal risks that can consume already scarce resources. **Table 1** describes the ways that gossip can land an urgent care operator in court.^{8,9}

Fostering a Gossip-Free Workplace

Given the magnitude of business risk, urgent care operators must be particularly vigilant in guarding against workplace gossip. Like any employee, a manager experiences stress and frustration, and sometimes venting these emotions to colleagues can be therapeutic. Yet, employees look to management for cues on what is acceptable behavior at work. If management engages in workplace gossip, there's no question that this behavior will become "normalized" and employees will do the same. In fact, a manager who gossips will soon find himself or herself the subject of the toxic culture he/she has created.

Managing gossip takes a multi-pronged effort aimed at building a supportive culture:

1. *Walk the Walk.* Managers and supervisors must make it clear that they do not and will not participate in gossip. Gossip requires a sender and a receiver, so it's not enough for management to not spread gossip; they can't even listen to it. Here's an appropriate response to an employee who wants to talk negatively about someone else: *"It's not okay to talk like that about someone who is not here. If you don't have anything else you need to talk to me about, I'm going to get back to work."*
2. *Spread the Word.* Managers and supervisors need to make it clear that gossip is not appropriate and will not be tolerated. One high-volume urgent care center has adopted a "zero tolerance" attitude toward gossip—employees sign a pledge to not gossip and if they are caught gossiping, they are fired on the spot. There is no ambiguity in management's stance. Employees need to know the damage gos-

Put an end to gossip in your medical practice; doing so will improve the emotional health of your practice, your staff, and the patients who rely on them.

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sip can cause for them and for the organization. Encourage employees to vent their frustrations in appropriate ways and to seek accurate information about business issues from management.

3. *Develop Formal Policies.* Addressing workplace gossip in the employee handbook helps employees understand their obligations and helps to define an organization's culture. Human resources policies can define unacceptable gossip and impose progressive discipline for violation of the policies. Such policies should

be reviewed at least annually and communicated clearly to employees (possibly addressing the policy and obtaining written agreement during performance reviews). They should be actively followed and promoted at all times. Performance management and employee evaluation policies can include communication skills and professional behavior. Such policies make it clear to employees that behaviors that create discord or undermine teamwork are not sanctioned within the organization. As with any new employment policy, management should consult with legal counsel to ensure anti-gossip policies meet all legal requirements.

4. *Improve Communication.* Lack of information from the top about important business issues necessitates "grapevine" communication. In the absence of authoritative information, employees tend to speculate, and gossip spreads the speculation. Reliable and timely communication trumps gossip; there's no need to speculate and spread rumors if everyone knows exactly what is going on with the business. In addition, supervisors can teach employees techniques for derailing gossip, such as changing the conversation to a neutral topic or making positive comments about the subject.
5. *Confront Gossip Mongers.* Supervisors may need to talk individually with employees who repeatedly spread gossip, especially if their behavior exposes the organization to legal risk. Employees need to understand the damage their gossip can cause and that it can become a performance issue if it continues. Employees may not realize the impact of their actions;

Social Media: The Modern Vehicle for Workplace Gossip

With nearly a half-billion users on Facebook and millions of others on social “networking” sites like Google+, LinkedIn and Twitter, businesses need to realize the risk of gossip moving from the office to the online arena. The damage that can occur when employees bad-mouth co-workers, managers or employers online is not only that it’s in writing, but it’s generally more widely read and its consequences can be more enduring.

As a result, many businesses have instituted separate policies for electronic communications that prohibit employees from making defamatory statements about the company or its workers, competitors, agents, or partners.

But larger employers must keep in mind that a recent ruling by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) establishes the right of employees to communicate with one another via social media about wages, hours, and other workplace conditions. A survey of social media issues before the NLRB in 2011 conducted by the US Chamber of Commerce found that the most commonly raised issue brought to the board was whether an employer has overbroad poli-

cies restricting employee use of social media, or that an employer unlawfully disciplined—or fired—an employee over social media activity.¹¹

In today’s “networked” world, an employee handbook should include a social media policy. Simply having such a policy tells your employees that you are aware of sites like Facebook and Twitter and that you may be keeping an eye on what they are posting. But be clear on exactly what sort of communication is prohibited (for example, the sharing of confidential information, photos of the workplace, proprietary information and disparaging remarks about other employees, which typically falls under bullying and harassment legislation) and detail the consequences of such behavior.

If applicable, the policy should include a disclaimer stating that the policy is not intended to limit employees’ rights under the National Labor Relations Act. With social media law still evolving, in order to ensure the handbook is in line with relevant legislation, employers should hire competent legal counsel and stay abreast of NLRB developments.

tactful and direct communication is often an effective way to stop an employee from gossiping.

6. *Provide Regular Training.* Providing employees with regular training on acceptable workplace behavior is another way to build a successful organizational culture that minimizes workplace gossip. Training on effective communication, dealing with conflict in the workplace, professional courtesy, etc. can all help to build a more productive team. Training should be adapted to the dynamics of the specific operation (a good trainer will do this) and should involve practical applications like role-plays and discussions about day-to-day scenarios encountered by employees.

7. *Promote Acceptable Outlets for Stress.* It’s important for everyone in a demanding workplace to find healthy outlets for stress, such as spending time with friends outside of the organization or regular exercise. It may be beneficial to adopt a workplace policy that encourages exercise to ensure employees have an opportunity to manage stress. For instance, consider holding “walking” team meetings, instead of conducting these inside. Another idea that can both reduce stress and foster team morale is to incentivize employees as a team to take part in structured programs like the *Ten Thousand Steps Challenge*.

Perhaps most importantly—in an anti-gossip organization, employees should feel comfortable going to management if they are concerned that gossip is affecting the work environment. Gossip can never be addressed if it’s not a problem anyone is willing to own up to.

Interviewing and Hiring

A factor in workplace gossip frequently attributed to urgent care centers is that they tend to employ an entry-level workforce that skews heavily young and female. Some operators have actually expressed that if they increased “diversity” in their centers—presumably by recruiting less “gossipy” individuals—they could improve workplace dynamics. The false assumption is that women tend to gossip more than men and those in lower-level positions gossip more than managers and providers. The fact of the matter is that people of all ages, genders, and educational levels engage in gossip.

Although stereotypes cannot be blamed, it is known that people with a strong need for social approval and dominance tend to gossip more, while independent, high-achieving people tend to gossip less.¹⁰ Identifying these types of people at the recruitment stage (that is, through psychometric testing) may be prudent, although an individual’s propensity to gossip is significantly influenced by the culture and behavior of his/her peers and making policy and cultural changes may be

a more effective mechanism of curtailing gossip in an existing team.

Utilize Formal Communication Methods...Frequently

Because gossip thrives in cultures where organizational information is scarce, operators can reduce gossip by using formal communication methods as much as possible. Weekly team meetings with the purpose of explaining decisions and directions within the business can be useful. In times of significant change or high stress, daily “huddles” may be required to ease employee anxiety. In these sessions, management must be open and responsive to employee feedback and concerns. It’s always better to take the time to provide requested information (where possible) than to have employees guessing about the content of closed-door sessions.

Conclusion

Workplace gossip is extremely common in organizations where staff works in close proximity delivering “people-oriented” services. However, gossip also has the power to be extremely destructive, undermining working relationships and morale and affecting productivity and customer service. While gossip is often thought to be an inevitable fact of working life, there are strategies that managers can adopt to minimize its pervasiveness. Using formal communication methods on a regular basis, encouraging healthy outlets for stress, having a clear policy on workplace gossip and providing regular training on acceptable workplace behavior can help diminish workplace gossip and create a stronger and more effective organizational culture.

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