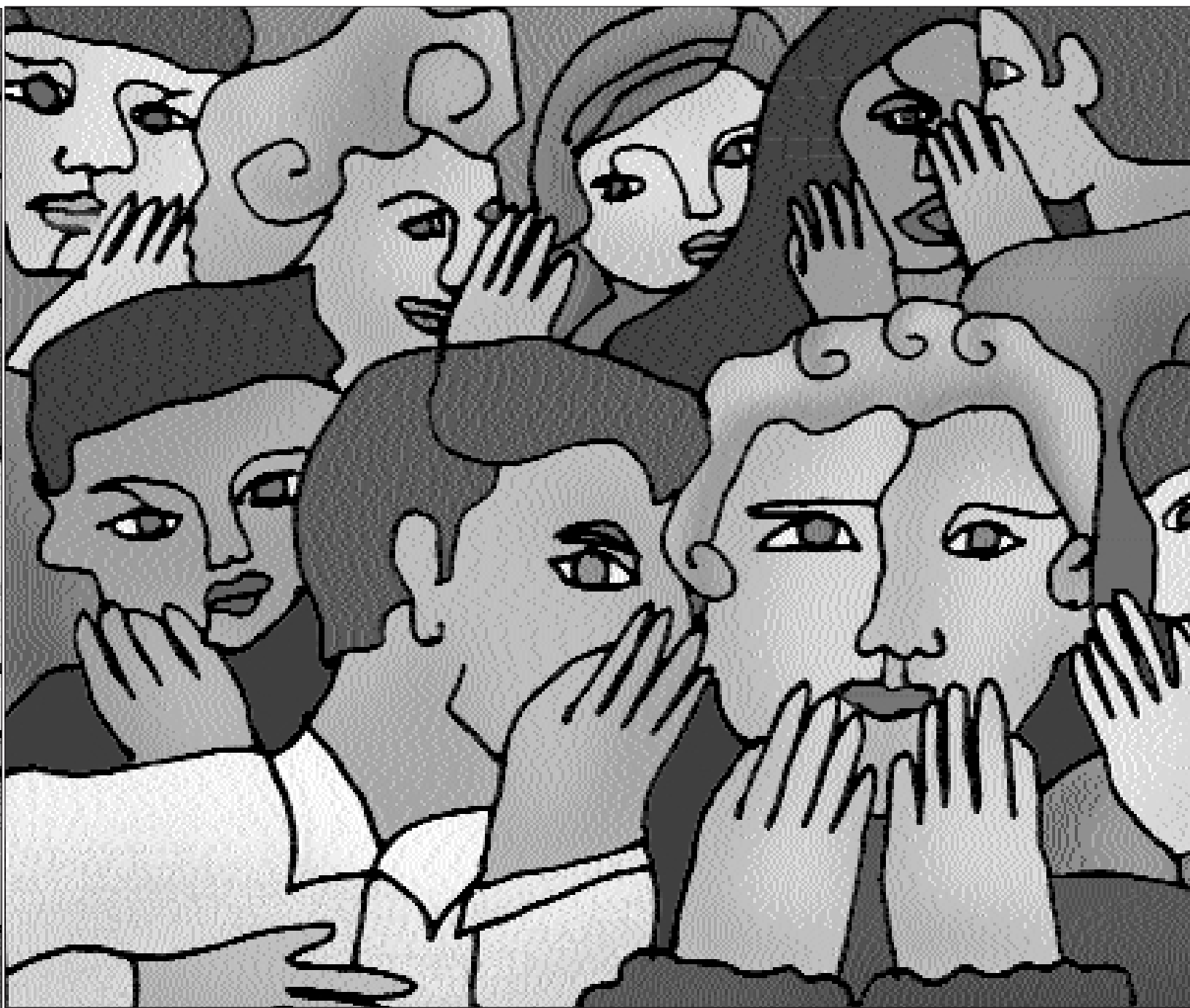


# WORDS CAN HEAL.ORG

## Workplace Kit





## TAKE THE PLEDGE!

Take the **Words Can Heal Pledge** and become a part of a new national campaign to enhance relationships and build respect, tolerance and integrity through the practice of positive speech. This compelling call to sensitize people to the power of their words will make a difference in your life and the lives of everyone you know.

An all-star team of political, corporate, entertainment and spiritual celebrities has already signed on in support of the campaign, including U.S. Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle, Senators Harry Reid, John McCain, Joseph Lieberman, and Joseph R. Biden, Jr.

The Words Can Heal Campaign promises to engage Americans of all walks of life, faiths, and affiliations through dynamic advertisements, an internet site, our new book called *The Words Can Heal Handbook*, lively seminars, and television, radio, and newspaper stories.

Join us by taking the Pledge today and letting others know about your commitment through sharing the pledge, stickers, tips & tools, and articles that are in this kit.

You can order additional pledges, pins, Workplace Awareness Kits, Family Awareness Kits, or the lively *Words Can Heal Handbook: How Changing Your Words Can Transform Your Life and the Lives of Others* at [www.wordscanheal.org](http://www.wordscanheal.org). While you are logged on to the site, sign up for bi-weekly healing words e-mails that will help you keep your pledge alive.

### *The Words Can Heal Pledge*

I pledge to think more about the words I use.

I will try to see how gossip hurts people, including myself,  
and work to eliminate it from my life.

I will try to replace words that hurt with words that  
encourage, engage and enrich.

I will not become discouraged when I am unable to choose  
words perfectly, because making the world a better place is  
hard work.

And I am pledging to do that, one word at a time.

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**HEALING  
WORDS  
IN THE  
WORKPLACE  
TOP TEN  
TIPS**

- 1** Bite your tongue before you gossip; your tongue may hurt, but your colleagues and reputation won't.
- 2** Open communication creates a positive, productive work environment; lunch room gossip and rumors take it away.
- 3** Promote people's well-being and watch your workplace transform for the best.
- 4** Use your mouth and feet to stamp out gossip. Change the subject or just walk away if someone gossips...hey, isn't that my cell phone ringing?
- 5** Never say derogatory things about yourself; people might agree with you.
- 6** Humor is great but not at the expense of others; joking around usually comes around.
- 7** Give others the benefit of the doubt and they'll probably do the same for you.
- 8** E-mails, letters and pictures can come back to haunt you; communicating gossip through writing, verbal hints or body language is just as bad as saying it.
- 9** Never take a gossip's word as fact; there are always two or more sides to a story so check the facts for yourself.
- 10** A positive attitude is contagious; your colleagues and bosses respect a kind, respectful person and run from the opposite.

# HEALING WORDS IN THE WORKPLACE FACT SHEET

- Imagine a company of 200 employees. If each employee spent one hour a day trading gossip, it would result in \$160,000 of lost productivity each month! (Based on \$40 per hour, salary and benefits.) That's \$1.92 million a year!<sup>(1)</sup>
- Gossip has been shown to boomerang on the gossiper. "...When you gossip, you become associated with the characteristics you describe, ultimately leading those characteristics to be 'transferred' to you," reports researchers in the APA Journal of Personality and Social Psychology.<sup>(2)</sup> This is why, "for example, when Kenneth Starr accuses Clinton of perjury, Starr himself may be seen as more deceitful."<sup>(2)</sup>
- Gossip flourishes in workplace environments that fail to address issues head-on or believe a policy prohibiting gossip will take care of it. Accurate, open communications, cross-functional contact, problem closure, and honoring commitments creates an environment based on trust, that will go a long way to stopping gossip.<sup>(3)</sup>
- Companies have the right to terminate employees for gossiping or making negative or unprofessional comments over their company e-mail systems.<sup>(4)</sup>
- While some people use gossip as a tool to impress people and build influence, the effect peters out as people who gossip too much become known as "big mouths" who can't be trusted. Colleagues may even come to resent them for taking up so much of their time.<sup>(5)</sup>
- Men are just as likely to gossip as women; they just call it "shop talk", "shooting the breeze", or even "networking."
- E-mails are never confidential. All it takes is a simple click of the Send Button and hundreds will be reading your "confidential" message within minutes.

(1) "The High Cost of Communication" by John R. Hall, Business Management Editor, [www.achr.news.com/8/01/2000](http://www.achr.news.com/8/01/2000).

(2) "Be Careful With That Gossip" by John Skowronksi, Ph.D., Donal Carlston, Ph.D., and Lynda Mae, M.A. and Matthew Crawford. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, April 1998.

(3) "Deal With Gossip" by Carol Patton. Human Resource Executive Magazine.

(4) "Electronic Interaction In the Workplace" by Mark S. Dichter and Michael S. Burkhardt. [www.MorganLewis.com/art61499.htm](http://www.MorganLewis.com/art61499.htm)

(5) Levin, J., and Arluke, A. Gossip: The Inside Scoop. New York: Plenum, 1987

# HEALING WORDS IN THE WORKPLACE RESOURCE SHEET

## WEBSITES

[www.wordscanheal.org](http://www.wordscanheal.org) – Our campaign's website features *The Words Can Heal Handbook* which you can preview on the site. Learn how to get real with the Healing Words Pledge and how to have healing words in your family life as well. Sign up for the bi-weekly Healing Words e-mail to keep your Healing Words Pledge alive!

## BOOKS

### **The Words Can Heal Handbook: How Changing Your Words Can Transform Your Life and the Lives of Others**

By Hilary Rich, Irwin Katsof, & Chaim Feld. What you say is the single biggest factor determining your happiness. Enhance your relationships at home, work, and in your community. Called “a treasure” by Jack Canfield of *Chicken Soup for the Soul* fame, you can order this book for only \$9.95 at [www.wordscanheal.org](http://www.wordscanheal.org) or by calling 866-967-3722. You can also purchase it at your local bookstore.

## ACADEMIC RESEARCH ARTICLES

“Electronic Interaction in the Workplace: Monitoring, Retrieving and Storing Employee Communications in the Internet Age.” By Mark S. Dichter and Michael S. Burkhardt. (A comprehensive summary of the serious legal aspects of e-mail communications in the workplace.) <http://www.morganlewis.com/art61499.htm>

“Passing the Word: Toward a Model of Gossip and Power in The Workplace.” By Nancy Kurland and Lisa Hope Pelled, *Academy of Management Review*, April 2000. [http://www.findarticles.com/cf\\_0/m4025/2\\_25/62197049/p1/article.jhtml](http://www.findarticles.com/cf_0/m4025/2_25/62197049/p1/article.jhtml)

“Reining in Rumors.” By Dr. Nicholas Difonzo, Dr. Prashant Bordia, and Dr. Ralph Rosnow, *Organizational Dynamics*, 1994, 23:1, pp. 47-62.

“Rumor and Gossip in Interpersonal Interaction and Beyond: A Social Exchange Perspective.” By Ralph L. Rosnow and Robin Kowalski (ed), *Behaving Badly: Aversive Behavior in Interpersonal Relationships*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001, Chapter 8.

“Spontaneous Trait Transference: Communicators Take On the Qualities They Describe In Others.” By John J. Skowronski, et al, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 1998, 74:4.

**HEALING  
WORDS  
IN THE  
WORKPLACE  
INSPIRATIONAL  
QUOTES**

***“A gossip is one who talks to you about others; a bore is one who talks to you about himself; and a brilliant conversationalist is one who talks to you about yourself.”***

Lisa Kirk

***“The real art of conversation is not only to say the right thing at the right time but to leave unsaid the wrong thing at the tempting moment.”***

Dorothy Nevill

***“Do not go as a talebearer among your people.”***

The Bible, Leviticus 19:16

***“Whatever words we utter should be chosen with care for people will hear them and be influenced by them for good or ill.”***

Siddhartha Gomo or Buddha

***“Who gossips to you will gossip of you.”***

Turkish proverb

***“The things most people want to know about are usually none of their business.”***

George Bernard Shaw

***“Three people are damaged by gossip: the gossiper, the listener and the victim. One simple comment can travel far, damaging everyone in its wake.”***

Jewish tradition

***“Silence is true wisdom’s best reply.”***

Euripides

***“Sauce can stain a shirt just as hurtful words can stain a heart.”***

Internet User, Caramello145

***“Count him not among your friends who will retail your privacies to the world.”***

Publilus Syrus

***“Who desires life, who loves days of seeing good? Guard your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit.”***

Psalms 34



# Deal With Gossip

By Carol Patton

Top Story by *Human Resource Executive® Magazine*

**T**here was once a chief operating officer whose executive assistant didn't like several other senior execs in the organization. So she began spreading malicious rumors about them to employees. Soon, people began falsely assuming that her thoughts were actually based on the COO's opinion of his co-workers.

The gossip quickly spread throughout the corporate ranks. It jeopardized relationships and launched a series of confrontations. The truth was revealed, tears flowed and in the end, employees offered her their forgiveness and support. Now the executive assistant - even though she still dislikes those senior execs - shares an honest and open relationship with them.

While that happened more than a decade ago in a company that will remain unnamed, at its administrators' requests, workplace gossip is even more prevalent today than it was then. Some HR execs compare it to a disease that spreads uncontrollably, destroying everything in its path. Others

label it as a betrayal to workers, saying it undermines trust in relationships and can rock almost any organizational culture to its very core.

The consequences of this kind of betrayal are too costly for employers to ignore. Many are reluctantly owning up to gossip's existence and trying to stop it before it starts. By helping employees understand its destructive nature, providing them with clear and timely communications and creating a safe atmosphere in which they can express honest fears and concerns, the healing can begin.

***“I've seen people quit, whole departments come apart with rivalry and employees become angry and suspicious”***

## **Toxic Results**

Jim Nunan has dealt with workplace gossip as vice president of human resources for five different corporations, all of which he has chosen not to identify.

“I've seen people quit, whole

departments come apart with rivalry and employees become angry and suspicious,” says Nunan, now senior vice president of human resources for Nonstop Solutions in San Francisco. The company, which employs 200 workers, minimizes the cost of product flow between the time goods are manufactured and placed in consumers' hands.

One of the most dramatic examples he offers occurred in the late 1980s. At the time, his company's merger created three regional offices, each with its own culture, product and senior executive staff, members of which would frequently malign co-workers behind their backs.

Eventually, managers started buying into the gossip and began spreading it to supervisors and front-line workers. Valued employees began quitting one after the other, and the company quickly earned the reputation among its workforce as being disjointed, disorganized and confused.

Fed up with the situation, Nunan called in HR consultant

Arky Ciancutti, a specialist in building back trust in organizations.

“It was the only time I’ve ever been able to talk the CEO into doing a two-day training course for the entire company,” he says, although the 12 execs participated in a condensed version of the course. During the several-hour session, Ciancutti explained the damage that occurs when company leaders lack integrity by gossiping and encouraged them to speak candidly and constructively to each other.

Although one exec ended up quitting shortly after the session, the approach proved successful. According to Nunan, everyone learned communication skills that kept issues out in the open and, in years ahead, still used them to fix problems instead of blaming each other.

Nunan hopes employees at his current job will all be required to participate in this workshop every year. He says many HR execs lack the “intestinal fortitude” to push programs like this because senior execs often think they’re a waste of time and criticize HR for having its head in the clouds.

Still, HR has to be very tough at

the senior level. If corporate execs are hurting the company, says Nunan, HR needs to provide clear examples of their behavior to the CEO, who can then push the executive team into modeling appropriate behavior.

***“While it’s almost innate in every human being to complain to people of like minds, it’s very destructive”***

In each of his corporate HR jobs, he says, employees have often come to him with rumors about other workers. His usual response is to teach them how to give constructive feedback, then encourage them to talk to the source of their frustration.

“If employees don’t know the truth, they’ll create their own truth and oftentimes, it’s a heck of a lot worse than reality,” Nunan says. “While it’s almost innate in every human being to complain to people of like minds, it’s very destructive.”

**Spotting Trouble**

Gossip generally flourishes in workplace cultures that are reluctant to address it head-on or believe a corporate policy prohibiting it takes care of the matter. Oftentimes, the atmosphere produces frustrated employees who can’t reach

closure on an important job-related issue.

“If you leave the water cooler and hear about a problem you can’t solve or don’t hear employees talking about steps for the solution, then people feel there’s a negative consequence to reporting problems,” says Ciancutti, co-author of *Built on Trust: Gaining Competitive Advantage in Any Organization*, and founder of the Learning Center in Mendocino, Calif., which creates team-building techniques. He adds that employees lose their connection with each other and consider co-workers obstacles rather than helpers.

Another warning sign is when management fails to make credible promises. Those employees who perceive such misleading leadership as unjust usually don’t stick around. Sadly, these are often the company’s top producers.

Some employers simply ignore “toxic trashing” or label workers as constant complainers or troublemakers.

Although they want to solve the problem, he says, managers often avoid digging down deep to its root because they don’t want to deal with the pain or

frustration experienced by employees.

Under these circumstances, the organization's leaders need to explore their willingness to change the company culture and make promises to employees they'll keep, such as eliminating soft commitments.

Ciancutti says change will only occur under the following conditions: when employees realize that they're only hurting themselves; when the consequences are painful; when they recognize their participation in the problem and when they recognize that they can control their own behavior.

But what about rampant gossip not based on perceived employee performance? Ciancutti says this kind of gossip is a step beyond tolerance and is an indicator of a very bored workforce. Even so, it's still dangerous and can create a very negative workplace. Employers need to intervene immediately and exercise their right to provide consequences for that behavior.

"Establish a culture based on closure and commitment and have lots of cross-functional contact," says Ciancutti, who is also a physician. "Part of the

360 feedback should always be based on cultural considerations that have to do with closure, commitment and credible promises."

**Connecting Workers**

Employee communication also plays a big role in breaking down stereotypes and false perceptions. By viewing communication tools as strategic levers, accurate information can flow on operational, strategic and personal performance levels, says Joe Colosimo, senior VP at Organizational Resources Counselors Inc., an international HR consulting company with offices in New York and Pittsburgh.

***"While it's almost innate in every human being to complain to people of like minds, it's very destructive"***

"The larger the company, the more likely [it is that] the arteries of communication get clogged with information that may be totally wrong, maybe even politically motivated," he says. "There has to be an active, robust behavior pattern of communications, especially at the senior level."

Colosimo says senior execs need to look inward to

examine their personal work styles and how they are perceived by employees. Even CEOs must do their part and hold other top execs accountable for effectively communicating with staff.

During the last decade, much insecurity has crept into employee-employer relationships due to downsizing, merger mania, the speed at which businesses are changing and even the ways in which e-mail is handled. These forces have inflamed employees' feelings about each other and how their company treats them.

Sometimes, e-mail is used to convey negative personal feedback. Unlike verbal comments that are usually forgotten in time, employees save damaging e-mails and repeatedly show them to others, which destroys trust and fuels rumor mills.

"The issue of building trust in the workplace in a tight labor market through an effective, strategic communication process may be the single biggest lever in the portfolio of HR activities," says Colosimo, former senior VP of HR for Westinghouse Corp. and UtiliCorp. United. "Make sure that strategic communication

and senior management are in front of employees throughout the process. They're absolutely vital ingredients to keeping gossip at a minimum."

Some companies take it a step further. Consider the Donnelly Corp., a global automotive supplier that supports multiple facilities in Holland, Mich. The manufacturer helps its 2,600 domestic employees stay connected to the organization through its equity structure, which comprises six different committees.

Each committee tackles work issues related to one specific manufacturing plant. While members meet monthly, they also address employee questions daily and are able to stop rumors from growing.

"Rumors are constant," admits Mollie Dalman, chair of the Donnelly Committee that handles corporate-wide work issues. "It doesn't take very long for people to get the story straight. We've never had anything get out of control."

**Damage Control**

At U.S. Vision, a manufacturing company based in Glendora, N.J., HR addresses gossip via 15-minute sessions with employees, information letters and voice mails, says Mark Cichonski, the company's

director of technology who also handles HR functions such as training and change management activities.

***"We do damage control as soon as we hear about potential problems"***

He recalls two recent rumors that required the company to take action. Last May, the local newspaper ran a story about the optical market and used old, stock photos of the manufacturer's facility. He says the copy combined with the photos gave the false impression that the industry and company were in serious financial trouble.

Rumors started flying about the plant closing and employee layoffs coming. To squelch them, he says, all 500 employees were invited to a series of scheduled group sessions - within one week of the story's publication - in which the industry's and company's statuses were explained to employees.

Cichonski says meetings of this nature can alleviate employees' fears by providing them with small sound bytes of information so as not to overload them with too many details but to focus instead on how potential changes

specifically impact them. The meetings were also only 15 minutes long so they would not turn into gripe sessions.

"Employees don't want to hear a bunch of business mumbo-jumbo," says Cichonski. "But I was surprised at how savvy our manufacturing workers were regarding the level of information they had from the Internet."

In September, he says, another organization offered to buy the company, but U.S. Vision rejected its offer. Nevertheless, employees caught wind of the potential sale and rumors began circulating once again.

Around that same time, the bid was going to be mentioned in an upcoming industry publication. Before the story was published, the company's president sent a detailed voice mail about the rejected sale to about 60 company managers throughout the country, then asked them to share the information with their staff.

"We do damage control as soon as we hear about [potential problems]," Cichonski says. "We're also honest [about] the fact that we don't have all the answers, so our people realize that management is human, too."

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