I Heard It Through the Grapevine

Dealing with Gossip

At a networking event, a small group of competitors quiz an insurance company relationship manager about recent developments at another company. Although he normally enjoys the give-and-take of industry functions, this speculation makes him uncomfortable. Is listening to gossip as bad as spreading it?

STEPHEN SCULLION,
DIRECTOR OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT, CRAWFORD AND COMPANY
The social rumour mill has been around as long as, well, as long as there have been mills. In fact, most human resource professionals are advised to be cognizant of its power and ubiquity in the workplace as it is often a good barometer of personnel morale.

You would be hard-pressed to imagine anyone who has not used or been involved in rumour mongering at some time. In fact, the scenario’s protagonist was looking forward to finding out a little something himself and it was only when he was asked to be the font of rumour that he felt the pangs of conscience. The degree to which harmless rumour turns into dangerous gossip depends upon three distinct elements:

• **Specificity:** The more general a tale is, the less likely it is that it will be believed. However, even giving vague references as a raconteur turns an anonymous story into a roman à clef.

• **Purpose:** Is the rumour intended to hurt someone or something? If so, consequences can and will flow backward. I have yet to hear of a complimentary rumour returning to haunt someone.

• **Reliance:** Common sense must prevail, but if your position renders you an expert in what you expound upon and someone acts upon your words, professional liability may be imposed. If you owe a fiduciary duty to someone, beware of loose words.

It would be unrealistic to attempt to scotch all rumours that circulate. What we do when we are placed in a situation rife with speculation, however, speaks to how we respond as professionals. As a general rule then, if the rumour is specific and/or if it is negative and/or if it is going to be relied upon, hark the words of my Glaswegian mother: “You rarely regret what you didn’t say.”

MARCUS B. SNOWDEN
BLANEY MCMURTRY LLP
Gossip is not restricted to the insurance industry. While the natural tendency in any profession is to try and stay current on issues and events, the guiding principle for dealing with gossip and rumour should remain constant—it comes not from any rule book or text on ethics but rather from what we all were told from an early age: “If you can’t say something nice about a person, don’t say anything at all.”

That this relationship manager felt “uncomfortable” is a good sign. If you feel similarly in a situation such as this, trust your instinct, sense of fairness and integrity—something is not right.

Doing the right thing is often going to be a judgment call. For example, doing or saying nothing, changing the topic or otherwise deflecting interest might be appropriate depending on the circumstances. Arguably, this manager did the right thing, at least in part, by professing no knowledge.

However, the better approach, in the interest of fostering a more
professional ethical environment, might be to go further and turn the tables on those making the remarks. Certain reflective questions, asked mildly but firmly, sometimes allow people a chance to think more carefully about what they pass along. Try:
  • “Is this just a rumour or is it something you know for certain?”
  • “I am not prone to gossip; are you sure what you are saying about (name of subject) is true?”
  • “This sounds unlikely, have you spoken to (name of subject) directly to confirm this story?”
Apart from concerns about legal liability under local defamation laws for false or misleading statements, the prudent insurance professional should be very careful about relating or encouraging the spread of gossip.
Perhaps the best way to consider the issue is to ask yourself: What if I were the subject? Is my professional standing advanced by passing along or prompting others to share “the message?” This manager was courageous in meeting the definition of what it is to be a “professional.” Being an ethical professional is about being trustworthy, having integrity, demonstrating loyalty, being accountable, and acting fairly. Now that is something to talk about!

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