

Creating a Gossip Free Culture

Gossip kills friendships, trust, and joy. It can push people into depression and some even to despair. If left unchecked it can ruin families, churches, schools, businesses, and entire corporations. Some will argue this is just the human condition...there's not much you can do about it. Unsuccessful attempts to stifle it only allow it to escalate to new heights or retreat into the quiet and toxic hidden closets.

Recently a Christian leader came forth with a solution to the gossip that was plaguing him and his entire organization. Since the Bible says "don't gossip" he simply forbade it. *"Once I will warn you, and then I will fire you! I have a zero-tolerance-plus-one policy for gossip. I will teach you once, and then I will fire your butt!"* Brainyquote.com

Such harsh threats, I find, may get rid of a gossip, but they create a culture of fear. The root of the gossip still thrives and just stays underground and anonymous. It is still there.

Here is what I have found. If a culture of gossip exists, it's almost always because of this: the leadership has created the environment for it to thrive. And it's the servant-leader's job to change the culture—to create a culture where there is simply no need, nor desire, to gossip.

Gossip thrives when leaders are not taking the initiative to actively listen.

We can train people and repeat all we want to "take the right complaint to the right leader who can actually do something about it." But it simply won't happen if the leader isn't the first one to take the initiative. We can call out those who talk to others first as "gossips" and confront them with their sin. We can get angry because of the natural consequences of such behavior, but if we as leaders are not being examples by being "quick to listen and slow to speak" it is actually us—the leaders—who are sinning first.

I've always had confidence that I was a good listener. I would never shut down anyone who came to me with complaints. I would willingly hear them out. And I would willingly make changes based on what I heard. So I concluded that I was approachable and a good listener. Unfortunately, it was the wrong conclusion.

One of my greatest failures as a leader was when I was leading a team of nine people in Central Asia. I thought we were working well together. I would get everyone's input on our goals and objectives at team meetings and we developed our master plan together. The team consisted of my brother, my cousin and his wife, and several other close friends. All of them knew I was approachable—right? Wrong. The very fact that I was the designated "leader" of the team put up an invisible barrier suddenly making me less approachable. My cousin, whom I was instrumental in his coming back to the faith, suddenly felt a distance and reluctance to approach me when his wife was having problems with the way I led the team meetings. Why? Why was it so hard to approach Jonathan, a cousin and friend for so many years? A simple answer. I was now

the leader. The relationship had changed. He didn't want to jeopardize the good relationship he had always had with me. So because of their fear of coming to me they gently vocalized some of their struggles with another couple on the team to see if they too were struggling with the same things. And sure enough, they were. They hadn't come to me either lest they risk our friendship. As they ruminated on these things, along with others, everything finally blew up in front of the national and international leadership of our organization at our yearly conference. And I had been kept completely clueless for close to a year.

Since this blow-up both couples have apologized for gossiping and not coming to me first, but instead taking these easily fixable issues to national and international directors above me. Indeed they should have come to me first. But ultimately, I realized it was I who had created an environment for this gossip to take root and grow. I should have killed the seeds of gossip before they ever had a chance to germinate. How? Very easily. I could have initiated a conversation with a simple question: "What can I do to better lead our team meetings?" This one question, if asked regularly, would have saved countless hours of their ruminating and an inevitable team blow-up, and I could have enlisted them to help lead in ways they were gifted. Everyone would have benefited if I had just asked for feedback early on. There would have been nothing to gossip about. And they would have seen by my change in actions that they could come to me about anything. As a servant-leader this is my job—to initiate and to actively listen.

When people are hurting as a result of dysfunction in an organization, they're going to naturally talk to others to see if what they're feeling is unique to them or if it's something others are feeling as well. We all have the need to be normalized. This is natural, and I don't think this should even be considered gossip. But when a group finds out that others are feeling it too, they can quickly come to an assumption that the leader just isn't a good leader. "Surely others have talked to him already!" This may be the wrong assumption. Perhaps it's just a blind spot. But the gossip begins. What many leaders do when they detect this gossip is threaten the gossipers while defending these threats with scriptural verses about gossip. This unfortunately backfires for it makes the leader appear even more unapproachable and it robs all joy from the team and replaces it with fear.

As servant-leaders, it is our job to start the conversation. We need to be vulnerable: *"Hey, I have blind spots and I need you all to help me." Then we need to regularly ask, one on one and in groups these questions: "What are you and others seeing that I'm not?" "What ways can I lead the team meetings better?" "What does the team need from me?" "Have you seen me hurt anyone without my being aware of it?" "What are ways I can help you and others on the team to succeed and thrive in this organization?"*

I learned a lot about myself and leading as a result of this team blow-up. The next place I worked—even though I was the designated leader—I immediately found another leader who could set the agenda for the team meetings and this saved everyone from frustration.

This may seem easy to initiate the conversation. But believe me, it's not. I still have a hard time going to my team and asking, "Hey, what am I not seeing?" "What can I do better?" Why is this

hard? Because they're going to tell me something, and it means I have to change—and personal change is hard! By simply not asking, we can delude ourselves into thinking all is well when it's not. It's easier to simply stay ignorant than it is to change. So, you have to force yourself to initiate feedback. The sooner and more often you do it will largely determine the level of gossip in your organization. ***Very few will ever talk negatively about you behind your back when you're openly inviting life changing input face to face.***

When we initiate in these ways, we're also modeling for others in the organization that this is the humble and right path to growth, accountability, and healthy change. It creates a culture of open and honest communication. It lays the foundation of trust, which is the rock on which all healthy organizations are built.

Gossip thrives in cultures of fear.

Does your anger ever stop conversation and dialogue? Does it intimidate others so they can't share what they think, and even more importantly what they feel? Chances are, if you're like most leaders you don't know the answer to this question. Most leaders with anger problems are completely unaware this is happening. So, you need to ask perhaps in an anonymous questionnaire; "Have you ever seen me shut a conversation down with anger?" "Have I ever created fear in others with my response?" If the answers come back "Yes" then there's little doubt you are creating an atmosphere where gossip will surely live and thrive behind closed doors.

If those you lead can't bring the issue safely to you, then they will take it to others—guaranteed. Leaders with anger issues always push gossip underground where it will grow like magma under a capped volcano, and eventually erupt. When the leader tries to produce even more fear by forbidding the gossip with the threat of firing people, then the whole culture becomes toxic and unsafe for everyone.

The Christian leader who threatened his staff with the line "Once I will warn you and then I will fire you" used fear to try to control the behavior of his staff and ex-staff. He later found out there were secret Facebook and other web pages where the staff and ex-staff addressed the many ways he was bullying his employees. Instead of admitting his own problem with anger and being unapproachable, he did all he could to find out who had created the page and who was on it so he could retaliate and pay them back with threats and reprisals. This is the very behavior that creates the cultures of fear, intimidation, and oppression in communist countries under totalitarian regimes. I have lived in such countries. Fear is a powerful force. It can bring a level of control over people's actions. But it never wins the hearts of its people. Servant-leaders are called to create cultures of joy and of love that listens to the hearts of its people, and it is this love that casts out all fear. But sadly, cultures of fear prevail among human institutions and are way too common among churches.

Gossip thrives in cultures of secrecy.

Many times, there are decisions made behind closed doors that greatly affect a lot of people. Whenever the reasons for these decisions are withheld, people are left talking to each other trying to figure it out. This is especially true when there is a firing or resignation of a staff member. People surmise what the “real” reasons are that the staff member left. When leaders try to control the information for fear of it hurting the staff or the congregation, they invariably end up doing more harm than good. Why? Because it often sends the message, “We the leaders can deal with the truth, but we don’t trust the staff members or the church members to be able to handle it.” Some members may not be able to handle it, but withholding truth keeps them from any chance to properly deal with it. After all this is how children grow into adults—we trust them with more and more. We as leaders often keep the people perpetually babes by not letting them grapple with the truth.

Recently a pastor friend had one of his church elders decide to leave their evangelical church for a non-Protestant faith. The temptation for most pastors and elders would be to try to control or manage this kind of information because “the sheep just can’t handle it.” Well, my pastor friend came to a different conclusion. Instead of asking this man for a letter, and then having the other elders edit it until it was acceptable for the sheep to handle, he decided it was time for some growing up. He told the defecting elder that he wasn’t going to tell his story for him so he asked him to share why he was leaving with the whole congregation on Sunday morning. My friend admitted it was a risk because what if others became convinced and defected with him? But he believed this was not nearly as risky as trying to control the story, which would create an incredible opportunity for everyone to gossip and to invent a thousand stories. So the elder shared upfront why he was leaving for another faith. Now that elder had to field a thousand questions, but the other elders were thanked. No one else left the church –and perhaps more significant was the fact that that there was “zero” gossip about his explanation.

Paul and Barnabas had a sharp disagreement. The Bible did not hide it from us. It tells us why they went their own ways. Luke didn’t put some spin on it to protect the sheep. Those who had the Holy Spirit had to process it and decide.

I would love to see two church leaders say they have a sharp disagreement in front of the whole church and be able to say why they’re parting ways. And then for the congregation to see the two men hug each other and part in peace. But I have seen church after church try to control the stories, and when we try to control them we actually lose control and almost always push such men further apart and the congregation is left feeling deceived by its own leaders.

Of course, there are personal items in elder and staff meetings that are to be kept confidential – otherwise they would be gossiping. But the more secrets we leaders keep —whether it be salaries, resignations, firings, hiding the reasons for failure, or making big decisions without proper input—the less trust we leaders will receive from those we lead. And along with less trust, the more fertile the ground for the growth and spread of gossip.

There are institutions that feed gossip and preach to forbid it at the same time. And others that don't have to preach against it at all, for the leaders have created a gossip free culture by the way they model. I've been in both places. The first breeds a culture of fear and oppression. The second breeds a culture of joy and freedom. Take your pick, and then lead accordingly.