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Gossip and Hearsay in SAVI® by Drs. Juli and Rolland Fellows

SAVI®, the System for Analyzing Verbal Interaction, was created and developed by Anita Simon, Ed.D. and Yvonne Agazarian, Ph.D. References to SAVI® are used with permission.

Clearly gossip is a source of considerable interest in our culture. A recent web search on the word “gossip” produced over 2 million references including “Gossip Central”, “Celebrity Gossip” and “Daily Gossip Homepage.” One site, “E! Online Gossip”, enticed readers to “keep up with celebrity doings and ‘juicy bits’.” Gossip in the workplace also often grabs our interest. Yet what is the cost to our worklife? What can the System for Analyzing Verbal Interaction® tell us about gossip?

Anita Simon and Yvonne Agazarian, co-developers of SAVI®, put gossip and hearsay into Square 2, Data Void. These verbal behaviors sound as if they convey genuine information but little or no data-based information is transmitted. This is the case even in those instances when there is a kernel of truth in the gossip. Any kernel of truth is surrounded by a very high level of ambiguity. Who said what with what tone, what were the specifics and the context, what were the actual motivations of the people – all are unknown – making it hard to judge the value of the information.

SAVI® defines gossip and hearsay as “scandalous or salacious news reports about people - frequently malicious and delivered with a heightened sense of intensity, pleasurable excitement and affect.” Another common word for hearsay is rumor. An example of gossip or hearsay is (with a secretive, excited and intense tone) “Did you hear that the boss had dinner with that consultant?” or “I heard that the CFO is going to ask all nurses to take a 5% salary cut so we can make our budget.” The difference between such Square Two behaviors and data-based language such as personal information present (square 4), general information (square 5) or opinion (square 6) is that in squares 4,5 and 6 the language and facts are clear and specific, sources are cited, and the voice tone is neutral.

Gossip and hearsay perform a number of functions in an organization. They fill a vacuum when valid, reliable, clear information is spotty or absent. They provide entertainment and excitement. They can also be used to influence a situation, by attempting to alter the attitudes others have towards a situation or person. Anita Simon also suggests that gossip and hearsay allow us to connect with people without taking any significant risks. Sharing gossip can be an easy way to create a sense of intimacy between two people. Gossip and hearsay can be used with positive intent (I heard that the new doctor is wonderful and very qualified) or with malicious intent (I heard the new doctor is awful.)

Gossip and rumor are both a response to anxiety and a source of anxiety. When the environment is uncertain, for example during a reorganization, rumor is rampant because people are hungry for information and a sense of control. However, since rumor is often ungrounded in fact, it can provoke great anxiety about things that aren’t true or real.

Research from Simmons (1985) suggests there are two factors that increase the likelihood of rumors – importance of the topic to workers and lack of news from official sources. So there may be many

rumors about job or salary changes and few about whether the new letterhead is blue or green. When there's little news from official channels, or the news is very vague, rumors are more likely to increase.

SAVI® doesn't label any verbal behaviors as good or bad. SAVI® suggests, instead, that the value of a behavior is always relative to your communication goal. Thus, gossip and hearsay could be effective behaviors if your goal were to connect with your coworkers without taking any personal risk, or if your goal were to undermine someone's reputation or authority. They could be effective ways to fight the tedium and add some excitement to a boring task. Exchanging rumors can give us a temporary sense of control in an uncertain environment such as when management is changing programs.

While gossip may be effective towards certain goals, it is important to consider its effect on the goals of trust and workplace excellence. Gossip and rumor can ruin reputations, destroy relationships and even cause serious clinical mistakes. Reliance on gossip and hearsay in decision making can result in poor decisions and lowered morale. When gossip and hearsay become the norm, every member of the organization is a potential "victim" and trust between people is reduced. Gossip and hearsay are like junk food – they may provide immediate satisfaction but have little nutrition, and a constant diet of them can lead to poor organizational health. Reducing gossip can reduce anxiety and increase the clarity of information. Work and life are both hard enough without making ourselves and others more anxious through gossip.

Next month we'll tackle how to avoid gossip, both when you receive it and when you're inclined to send it. We'll also discuss what to do if you're the subject of gossip.

Simmons, Donald B. "The Nature of the Organizational Grapevine." Supervisory Management, Nov 1985.