GOSSIP? NO, NOT ME! AN EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an experiential exercise on the topic of gossip. It seems gossip occurs everywhere and frequently, so much so, that it is not even noticed—people just do it, often without thinking that they are doing it. Yet, we all know that gossip can have an impact, sometimes positive, but mostly negative, on the lives of people. This is also true for organizations. If gossip can have an impact on organizational performance, then it is something that managers must deal with in a deliberate and structured way. With that in mind, the authors have developed an experiential exercise which is meant to help the undergraduate student understand the dynamics of gossip and its impact on organizational performance. The paper begins with a short discussion on the nature of gossip, a review of management literature on the topic and concludes with a complete description of the exercise.

INTRODUCTION

There's nothing so delicious as the taste of gossip!
It melts in your mouth.
                    (Proverbs 18:8, Bible, CEV online).

"I usually don't gossip, but…."
"You have not heard this from me, but…"
"John told me that…."
"Don't tell anyone, but I heard that…."
"Did you hear about Susan? Well…"

Of course, none of these statements could be attributed to you or me—right? Yet, gossip is ubiquitous. It is a part of everyday life and indeed, a part of organizational life also. What if employees might regard gossip as a source of accurate and reliable information and behave based on that gossip. Kurland and Pelled, note, for example, that in organizations, gossip can be a means of exerting power by the gossiper over the recipient (2000). It is clear that an understanding of the dynamics of gossip is of importance for effective management (Gholipour, Kozekanan; and Zehtabi, 2011).

Extensive research on gossip has been conducted in several fields, like social psychology, anthropology, sociology and psychology for many years, but surprisingly, not a lot of research has been done in the area of management or organizational behavior (Noon and Delbridge, 1993; Kurland and Felled, 2000). Nonetheless, gossip has important ramifications for organizational life. For example gossip can have a direct or indirect impact on productivity or organizational effectiveness. As Michelson and Mouly point out, gossip is linked to group dynamics, romance at work, conflict, bullying, power and politics, stress, and leadership, where it can serve as both an independent, dependent or mediating variable, (Michelson and Mouly, 2002).

GOSSIP & RUMOR

While this paper is about gossip, it is important to distinguish between gossip and its neighbor, rumor, as people sometimes confuse the two terms. Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary (1996) defines gossip as "idle talk…especially about the personal or private affairs of others" (p. 611). Thus gossip is often associated with what would seem to be privileged knowledge on the part of one party about another party's personal affairs or interests. The privileged knowledge may be accurate or not, but the party knowing or hearing about it can use this for some ulterior motive if they choose to do so. Someone knowing or hearing about an office romance or illegitimate affair is a typical example. Rumor is usually distinguished from gossip by the nature or type of content. Rumor is generally "a

story or statement in general circulation without confirmation or certainty as to the *facts*." (Dictionary.com, 2011). For example, speculative talk about possible organizational downsizing would be called rumor, whereas whispers about someone's cussing at a coworker over a downsizing decision would be called gossip. Rumors involve uncertain events; gossip involves particulars, good or bad, about people's personal or private lives. Talking about a rumored event does not carry the same stigma as talking about the personal affairs of another person. For example, Cormany and Feinstein used a rumor that a hurricane was intensifying to give a role-play exercise's atmosphere a more unpredictable 'feel' for a hotel crisis planning exercise (2008).

ORGANIZATIONAL USES OF GOSSIP

Both rumor and gossip have various functions in organizations. Some of the key aspects of these functions, as well as their underlying theories are presented below. For example, Mishra found that discussion of sexual liaisons or romances between organizational members are often used to support or destroy various power relationships among employees, particularly female workers, (1990). And some researchers note that gossip about females and their actual or supposed office romances is because the gossipers believe these women are trying to advance their own careers and the gossipers want to damage the reputations of the females, (Pierce, Byrne & Aguinis, 1996, 23). Some recent research in the area of organizational "bullying," suggests that gossip is part of a larger attempt of some organizational members to "bully" others, (McCarthy, Rylance, Bennett & Zimmermann, 2001).

Gossip might also be utilized as a weapon in organizational politics. John Brandt lists a set of fictional characters that use gossip to advance their particular political agendas at work and warns the reader to be wary of such characters, as they are always around, meaning not just fictional, (Brandt, 2002). Gossip can also be used to advance a personal agenda. Using a social dependency model, Kurland, and Pelled, (2000), show how gossip can be used by some organizational members to gain control over others as well as resources both negatively and positively. Using the social dependency theory as a basis for gossip shows that gossip fulfills needs in both the one providing the gossip and the one receiving the gossip. This can have a beneficial outcome for the organization. Some researchers have suggested that gossip (and rumors) may be a way for employees to release tension in times of organizational anxiety or uncertainty, (Anthony 1973; Walker & Blaine 1991). In a 2005 talk in New Zealand, Associate Professor Susan Hafen discussed the extent, the circumstances and the ways in which rumor and gossip are used by managers as a way to send information to various employee groups and/or as a way to 'construct' an organizational reality. She is quoted as saying, "Skillful gossiping is a key to surviving, even thriving, in workplace politics - knowing what questions to ask to whom, and how to pass on stories that will help yourself and others."

Whether this is a constructive way to manage organizational tensions and stress remains to be studied. Several practitioner-type articles have been written which discuss the harm gossip can cause in organizations and what managers can and ought to do about it (D'O'Bryan, 1993; Greengard, 2001). Greengard (2001) discusses the negative effects of gossip on various organizational situations, but mainly discusses what can and should be done about gossip. Suggestions include sharing information with employees, not encouraging overly competitive behavior, strongly discouraging malicious gossip, stopping rumors quickly, and confronting employees who chronically engage in gossiping and spreading rumors.

Clearly, gossip is a phenomenon which managers must try to manage. But before managing, they need to understand the nature and dynamics of gossip. The following exercise is intended to start that process.

EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE BACKGROUND

TITLE:

An Experiential Exercise in Understanding the Dynamics & Impact of Gossip

PURPOSE & RATIONALE:

Most students have engaged in gossip or have been the target of it. Most of us understand the harm that it can cause to other people. Nonetheless, we may not be fully aware of how gossip can influence our behavior in organizations, including its potential influence on productivity whether it is positive or negative, (Kniffin and Wilson, 2005). This exercise, detailed in Appendix A, is designed to demonstrate the effects of gossip on a part of organizational life by having students participate in an experiential exercise which uses gossip. The exercise is intended to have students think about gossip in a formal, structured and serious manner.

AUDIENCE:

This exercise is designed for undergraduate business students.

TIME:

40-60 minutes, depending upon the amount of time the instructor wants to use for debriefing.

MATERIALS:

1. A student-lecturer who is new to the class;

2. One or more gossip spreading students who are pre-selected from the class;
3. A 10-20 minute lecture on a topic new to the class, (see Appendix B);
4. A quiz consisting of 10 objective questions on the lecture, (see Appendix C);
5. Answers to the quiz so that grading may be done in class, (see Appendix D).

SELECTION OF THE LECTURER:

The course instructor should carefully select a student to serve as the student "lecturer" or teacher for the exercise. The best possible person to serve as lecturer would be someone with whom students have not had prior contact. If possible, the instructor should try to find a student who is not in a section of the course where the exercise is to be given. It is less important that this person have teaching experience, although it might be helpful. The student-lecturer could receive credit for their participation as part of a teacher training program. For an inexperienced student-lecturer, the course instructor should prompt that student on how to serve in that capacity. We recommend that the student be chosen a week before the exercise is used so that he/she can prepare the mini-lecture (see APPENDIX B). This student should understand that some malicious gossip will be said about him/her during the exercise, but that it is part of the exercise.

PREPARATION FOR STUDENTS:

No special information or guidance needs to be provided to the students. If the instructor assigns any articles to be read on or about gossip, it may be better to have the students read these after participating in the exercise.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE LECTURE:

This exercise uses common nutritional information as the basis of the lecture (Appendix B). This topic was selected because the information is valuable, but unrelated to most business courses, and has a somewhat familiar content. (If necessary, the http://www.nutrition.gov, provided by the U. S. Department of Agriculture, has numerous downloads that can help the student-lecturer prepare for this exercise). As an alternative, the lecture topic could be one that has already been developed by the student-lecturer for another course, such as an education course. If this is the case, then the student-lecturer will also have to develop an objective quiz covering the lecture materials. Other potential lecture topics include recycling, solar energy, predicting or tracking hurricanes or tornadoes, water conservation, or any other general-interest topic. In any event, the lecture itself should be limited to 15 minutes or so.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE QUIZ:

The quiz to accompany the nutrition lecture is contained in Appendix C (or, the student can develop his/her own quiz depending upon the topic). As soon as the lecture ends, students should be given no more than 5 minutes to complete the quiz. This quiz consists of only 10 items that can be easily graded in class before the exercise debriefing. Important to the exercise, the student-lecturer must tell the class that he or she developed the quiz and is completely responsible for its content. This should be done no matter who actually wrote the quiz.

DEBRIEFING:

See Appendix A below.

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APPENDIX A: EXERCISE DESCRIPTION:

PREPARATION & BACKGROUND: There would be one student assigned the role of the student- teacher or lecturer and the remaining students divided into two large groups, A & B. (OPTIONS) The instructor may want to appoint some students to serve as "observers."

The student-teacher should be told to give the lecture in an impersonal and objective manner. The student playing this role should know the purpose of the entire exercise, including the roles of Groups A & B. A couple of students from each group should be called aside by the instructor and given some "special" information about the student teacher (see below).

Both groups will be told that they are going to attend a short lecture on nutrition (or another short lecture) and be tested on the lecture afterward. They are to be told that this is an experiment in **student teaching**. The instructor can tell both groups to "take a break" for 10 minutes while the student-teacher prepares his/her lecture. The groups (A & B) should not be allowed to talk to each other, but they are allowed to talk to the students in their own group during this break period.

The instructor will then get 4-5 student members (shills) from each Group and provide them with the following information about the student-teacher. The students are to spread this information in their respective groups as if they knew it to be true.

The shills are to tell the students in Group A that the student-teacher is mean and hard. Further, some shills should say that they heard the student-teacher is:

- A really nasty person
- Does not like the other students
- Very serious (too serious)
- Wants to see the class do poorly on the test (which is based on the lecture)—thinks this will impress the instructor
- Wants to show the class (and the instructor) that he/she is "tough" and "rigorous."
- The student-teacher really does not know anything about this topic and is going to pretend to be an expert
- That the student-teacher has been told to call on students and embarrass them in front of others

The shills from Group B are to tell the students in Group B that the teacher is nice and easy. Further, some shills should say that they heard the student-teacher is:

- Very bright
- Wants the students to do well
- Will make the exam easy
- Doesn't care if the class pays attention or not, but will make the test "easy"
- Knows that it does not matter how well the students do
- The student-teacher is an expert on this topic and you can expect to learn a lot from him/her whether you pay attention or not
- Will make the topic "very interesting."

The shills are free to add their own pieces of gossip as long as they "fit" the profile of the teacher for their group. After the shills have had 10 minutes or so the spread their information to their respective groups, then the lecture will begin. After the lecture is over (about 10-15 minutes), the student-teacher will give a short test (see APPENDIX C). Again, the student-teacher should not demonstrate any dominant personality traits.

DEBRIEFING: Debriefing is an important component of any experiential exercise, (Markulis & Strang), and this is particularly true for this exercise. The test can be graded by the individual students or a fellow student and the test scores of both groups should be compared by the instructor using the board. After comparing the test scores, the instructor should ask each group if they felt their test scores were in any way influenced by what they heard about the student-teacher beforehand.

The instructor should then ask the students what they thought about the student-teacher as she/he was lecturing and if their perceptions (based on the gossip they heard) influenced their test scores. Did it influence any other perceptions they had about the student-teacher? The instructor can then discuss the four functions of gossip (FINE).

1. Friendship (Will the friendship one seeks be genuine and long-lasting?)
2. Influence (Will the influence be sound and long-lasting?)
3. Net-working (Will the use of gossip help establish or get me into a solid network of friends and colleagues?)
4. Efficiency (Will gossip help make me and/or my colleagues more efficient. If so, how?)

Depending upon the time available, the instructor may want to cover one of more of the topics below:

- How and why did what the other students (the shills) said about the teacher influence your perceptions?
- Did this "talk" (gossip) facilitate or dampen your interest, enthusiasm or attention during the lecture?
- What if the student-teacher were their new manager—how might the gossip have influenced them?
- Are there moral implications regarding gossip?
- How would you feel if the gossip (any gossip) were about you?
- Do you like or listen to gossip (does gossip fulfill some need you have, like to belong).
- Do you usually believe gossip?
- Can gossip be used positively?
- State how gossip might affect organizational performance.
- Tell your own story or one you know of where gossip made some kind of a difference.
- Describe the various aspects of gossip.
- Distinguish gossip from rumor.

APPENDIX B: STUDENT-TEACHER LECTURE
(You can change the topic)

ENERGY NUTRIENTS AND DIETING

Instructions to student playing the role of student-lecturer. Make up a lecture covering the information below. You can use these notes as they appear below, add to them or even put them on a PP presentation, as long as they are covered completely in some way. You will have 10-15 minutes for this. Try to act as objectively, impersonally and as "professor-like" as possible. Make sure you tell the class that there will be a short quiz afterward.

I. A few million years ago, ancestors ate mostly fresh fruits and other fibrous plant material.
    A. Now, some people prefer low-fiber, high fat foods!
    B. Food Pyramids – charts of well-balanced diets
       1. 55 to 60% complex carbohydrates
          a. Eat fleshy fruits, cereal grains and legumes, including peas and beans (with fiber, vitamins, and minerals)
          b. Don't eat simple sugars, corn syrup, corn sweeteners, dextrose (glucose), etc.
       2. 15 to 20% protein (less for females)
          a. Animal proteins are complete (their amino acids match human nutritional needs) (milk, eggs, and meat).
          b. Plant proteins are incomplete (they lack one or more of the essential amino acids) so vegetarians must eat certain combinations of different plants (e.g., rice & beans).
          c. Protein deficiency is most damaging among the young since the brain grows rapidly during early life.
       3. 20 to 25% fats
          a. Currently butter and other fats make up 40% of kilocalories.
           *Butter is saturated and tends to raise blood cholesterol.
          b. Trans-fat (formed when liquid vegetable oils go through hydrogenation) raises cholesterol levels (but to a lower extent than butter).
          c. Non-trans-fat is best in the diet.
II. Dieting does no good without a long-term commitment to exercise.
III. The only easy way to keep off extra weight is by consistently moderating food intake and regular exercise.

APPENDIX C: LECTURE QUIZ

Instructions: Circle the best answer for each of the following questions or statements.

1. According to the food pyramids, how much is the complex carbohydrate weights?

    A. 35-40%.   B.   45-50%.   C.   55-60%.   D.   60-65%

2. According to the food pyramids, how much is the proteins weights?

    A. 15-20%.   B.   20-25%.   C.   25-30%.   D.   30-35%

3. According to the food pyramids, how much is the fats weights?

    A. 15-20%.   B.   20-25%.   C.   25-30%.   D.   30-35%

4. How can you take in complex carbohydrate in a healthy style?

    A. Eat peas and beans.
    B. Eat foods that contain simple sugar.
    C. Eat foods that contain corn syrup.
    D. Eat candy bars.

5. Which method of protein intake can be unhealthy?

    A. Eat food that contains plant protein.
    B. Eat food that contains animal proteins.
    C. Drink Milk.
    D. Eat eggs.

6. Which is a healthy way to take in fat?

    A. Take in non-trans-fat.
    B. Take in trans-fat.
    C. Eat butter constantly.
    D. Fat is always bad.

7. A person's health status will be set just by maintaining a healthy diet.

    A. True   B.   False

8. Vegetarians are always healthy.

    A. True   B.   False

9. Regular exercise is extremely important.

    A. True   B.   False

10. The reason why protein deficiency is damaging among young people is because most of young children are fussy when it comes to diet.

    A. True   B.   False

APPENDIX D: LECTURE QUIZ ANSWERS

1.	C.	55-60%.	
2.	A.	15-20%.	
3.	B.	20-25%.	
4.	A.	Eat peas and beans.	
5.	A.	Eat food that contains plant protein.	
6.	A.	Take in non-trans-fat.	
7.	B.	False	
8.	B.	False	
9.	A.	True	
10.	B.	False	