**Gossip: Are you part of the solution or part of the problem?**

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Dr. Betty, a practice owner, is scrambling because her technician, Katie, hasn’t arrived for her 9 a.m. shift. Katie finally arrives at 9:30 and apologizes, explaining that she slept in. Dr. Betty is upset because this is the third time this has happened in the last couple of months. However, rather than address the problem with Katie directly, Dr. Betty starts venting to Linda, her receptionist, saying that she can’t understand why Katie is always late. Linda shares some personal details about Katie and her boyfriend. The conversation then turns into a discussion about Katie’s personal life.

What’s wrong with this situation? Not only did Dr. Betty fail to address the problem directly with Katie, she’s made matters worse by venting about Katie to another staff member, leading to a gossip session about Katie’s personal life. Dr. Betty may feel better after venting about Katie, and Linda may feel like she’s strengthening the bond between her and her boss by disclosing personal information about another staff member. The problem is this type of gossip can’t help but lead to a deterioration of trust and morale within the staff team.

According to HR Today, gossip in the workplace is, “When people make negative or disparaging comments or criticisms about other staff; and/or creating or sharing or repeating, a rumour about another person.” This type of behavior is very enticing. It’s human nature to want to be “in the know” when it comes to the lives of others. But what goes around, comes around. Linda may feel secure right now, but as soon as she does something to frustrate Dr. Betty, she’ll worry that Dr. Betty is venting about her to someone else on staff. It is a case of, “*if she’s talking about someone else to me, what is she saying about me to someone else?”*

How can this situation be rectified? As the practice owner, Dr. Betty must first realize that she is part of the problem. Whether she has three staff or 200, she’s in a leadership position and shouldn’t be participating in discussions about the private, personal and sensitive affairs of her staff. By doing so, she’s making gossip in the clinic acceptable. As a result, it creates a lot of distrust on the team, leaving the “odd person out” feeling hurt, angry and unhappy. Each of them know they can go to Dr. Betty to talk about someone else, which they will continue to do to feel that they’re in Dr. Betty’s good books. This creates a vicious circle.

The solution to these issues lies in Dr. Betty’s hands. Here’s what she needs to do:

1. Dr. Betty must become more self-aware by refraining from participating in any clinic gossip and discussing staff’s personal details with other team members. When she’s frustrated with a staff member, she needs to vent to someone she trusts outside of the practice, such as a close friend or family member, not to her employees. Dr. Betty will have to draw the line when a team member starts to talk about another staff member by saying, “I don’t think it’s appropriate for us to be talking about this” then changing the subject. Once she sets a good example for her staff, she can address gossiping at a team meeting.
2. Schedule a meeting with her staff to acknowledge that the practice isn’t functioning as expected and discuss how she’d like to develop a more collaborative environment where everyone can feel comfortable and happy while getting their jobs done.
3. Introduce a “no gossiping” policy. She can suggest that if/when staff have an issue with someone else, that they discuss it between them and work it out. She should only hear about it if they can’t resolve the issue on their own. She must also outline consequences for gossiping, such as warnings and suspensions, so that staff understand that it won’t be tolerated.
4. Stop and remind a staff member about the “no gossiping” policy if they approach her to talk about another staff member.
5. Privately discuss work situations—such as lateness—with staff as they occur. If she doesn’t address improper behaviours with her staff, they will continue to think it’s acceptable.

Whether it’s the practice owner or the practice manager, those in leadership positions have to set an example for the rest of the team to follow. Setting clear expectations of what is acceptable (and what isn’t) allows those in management to be part of the solution and avoid future problems with the team.