

Sticks & Stones

“It isn’t what they say about you, it’s what they whisper.”

– Errol Flynn

Gossip, Reputation, and how Whispered Words Kill Careers

From celebrity gaffes to political scandals, if we can learn something about ourselves based on what makes the news, it’s that people love a good piece of gossip. Although many people condemn gossip as slander or hearsay, a person’s reputation can have serious consequences for his or her career.

What is Reputation?

In order to understand how gossip can affect one’s career, we have to understand the concept of reputation.

Personality has two parts: identity and reputation. Identity is personality from the inside – how we perceive ourselves. Because we create our identity, it changes over time and isn’t necessarily reflective of reality. In fact, how we view ourselves only modestly correlates with how others view us. This is an important disparity that we will discuss later.

Reputation, on the other hand, is personality from the outside –

how others perceive us. Reputation is easy to measure and tends to remain stable over time. Since the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior, reputation is a useful predictor of future job performance.

Hogan measures reputation along two dimensions:

Bright-side personality is what people see when we are at our best. It determines leadership style, judgment, and our ability to get along and get ahead.

Dark-side personality consists of characteristics that may actually be strengths under normal circumstances, but can become debilitating career obstacles under stress.

Polite Conversation

The British anthropologist Robin Dunbar is credited with the idea that language evolved as a mechanism to smooth social interaction, and that conversation among humans took the place of social grooming among chimpanzees. Conversation serves to strengthen social bonds.

In the 1970s, a group of psychologists studying normal conversation found that gossip accounted for around 70% of conversations. So, if conversation evolved as a way to strengthen social bonds, and 70% of conversations center



around gossip, it stands to reason that gossip is an important social mechanism.

Gossip is a social mechanism geared toward coming to a common agreement about another person's reputation. Gossip tells us who we can trust. Conversely, the prospect of acquiring a bad reputation serves to control people's otherwise selfish tendencies – gossip functions as a mechanism of social control.

Bad Reputation

That gossip is a major part of social interaction comes as little surprise to anyone who has been to high school or lived in a suburban neighborhood, but most people still view office gossip as little more than water-cooler character assassination – something that right-minded people will avoid. Recent scientific study proves otherwise.

Researchers at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Biology conducted an experiment in which they used the standard game theory – two people interact, and each has the option of competing or cooperating. If both cooperate,

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both win; if one competes while the other cooperates, the selfish person wins even bigger.

In this study, participants were provided information regarding the other person's reputation as either selfish or cooperative. As expected, if a person expected to interact with someone with a reputation for selfishness, he/she would behave selfishly, but if a person expected to interact with someone with a reputation for cooperation, he/she would tend to cooperate.

The real news in the study, however, concerned a particular wrinkle. In some cases, researchers would provide the participants with both data regarding the other person's performance and a description of that person's reputation. Participants invariably believed the gossip rather than the data.

As lead author Ralf D. Sommerfeld noted in a 2007 NY Times article: "If you know you already have the full information about someone, rationally, you shouldn't care so much what someone else says. It could be that we are just more adapted to listen to other information than to observe people, because most of the time we're not able

to observe how other people behave. Thus we might believe we have missed something."

Career Killer

A bad reputation can affect your career on three levels:

With your employees – More than half of people currently in leadership positions will fail, most often because they are unable to build and maintain a high-functioning team. If you have a reputation for micromanaging or being emotionally volatile, your employees will be less likely to trust and follow you.

With your coworkers – The ability to form productive relationships, or interpersonal skill, is critical in the modern workplace. A bad reputation can make your coworkers weary of dealing with you, which will hinder your performance.

With your boss – as the previously discussed study showed, your boss is more likely to pay attention to your reputation than your performance data. A bad reputation can keep you from getting a raise or a promotion.

So, how does one manage his or her reputation? The answer is self-awareness.

For many people, there is an important disparity between identity and reputation – how they see themselves is contrary to how others see them. That disparity causes them to ignore feedback, deny their shortcomings, and, ultimately, plateau or derail their career.

Personality assessment and feedback provides a clear understanding of your reputation and the characteristics and behaviors that contribute to that reputation. This powerful knowledge allows a person to make adjustments and implement behavioral changes to manage themselves.

About Hogan



As the international authority in personality assessment and consulting, Hogan has more than three decades of experience dramatically reducing turnover and increasing productivity by helping businesses hire the right people, develop key talent, and evaluate leadership potential.

Hogan's portfolio of employee selection, development, and leadership tools allows companies to better manage their most valuable assets – their people.