



Dr. Conflict

by Mark Light, MBA, PhD

When a new employee asks for help handling the office gossip, Dr. Conflict advises first against upping the conflict by putting said gossip on the defensive, and second to check out the office culture before leaping into the fray. Perhaps surprising to some, he also reminds the frustrated employee that while one should not pay attention to every detail of what goes on in the workplace, it is never a good idea to stay disconnected, either, as “today’s gossip may be tomorrow’s fact.”

DEAR DR. CONFLICT, I recently started working for a local nonprofit, where I had been volunteering since they opened their doors twelve years ago. I am sold on their mission and feel that it provides a very valuable service to our community. I took a significant pay cut from my previous salary, but I am trying to make it work. I enjoy most of my co-workers, and I definitely enjoy what I am doing.

I do have one co-worker who is a challenge. The most unfortunate part is that she is the person that I work with most closely. We have similar philosophies about our jobs, but she is a very big gossip and is constantly talking about the business of our staff and our volunteers. To a certain extent, the information that she provided me when I started was helpful in getting to know the volunteers and how and when they like to work, but it has gone way beyond that now.

We work in cubicles, and she sits next to me. Every time I am on the phone, she listens to my conversations and then quizzes me about who I was talking to and what I was talking about. It does not matter if it is a business or personal call. She then shares what she heard or gleaned from my telephone conversations with other staff people and volunteers.

I am the new kid on the block, so I am trying not to make too many waves, but I am at my wit’s end. I have told all of my friends and family not to call me at work. On the occasion when I have to take a call from a doctor or someone else like that, I have to deal with her questions as soon as I hang up. I have started walking away from my desk if I get a cell-phone call, but I cannot walk away if I get a call on my work phone.

I am trying not to snap, so I need a tactful way to approach her and try to put a stop to this. I know that I cannot stop her gossiping completely, but I

would at least like to be left out of her daily “town crier” editions. What should I do?

Frustrated in Florida

Dear Frustrated in Florida, If you’re looking for a tactful way to deal with your gossip vulture, start with Dr. Conflict’s rule of engagement: “Conflict begins with ‘you’ and ends with ‘I.’” Want to get your colleague lathered up, angry, and defensive? Simply say to her, “You are inconsiderate for eavesdropping on my conversations and then taking it on the road.” Then stand back for a preview of her next Gossipalooza.

Want a smoother ride? Start with “I,” as in, “I am angry” or “unhappy” or “upset.” This will usually elicit a response like “About what?” and open the door to describing her behavior, its effect on you, and the specific behavioral changes she needs to make. Keep it in the first person and stay neutral on the language. To keep your emotions in

check, do what Dr. Conflict does: breathe deeply and fold your hands loosely as if silently praying “Dear Lord, deliver me from strangling her.”

But before taking this tactful approach, ask yourself whether she’s a gossip troll or just a goof. Some gossip is utterly harmless and actually strengthens the social fabric of the workplace. “Gossip” is an umbrella term that includes everything from workplace discussions to hearsay. Friendly conversation is a long way from malicious gossip that cuts to the bone. You’re not supposed to pay attention to every detail in the workplace chatter, but don’t be completely disconnected, either. Remember management guru Henry Mintzberg’s warning that “today’s gossip may be tomorrow’s fact.”¹

Dr. Conflict knows that some readers will gasp in shock to hear that you should keep your ear to the rail, and that not all gossip is bad. Here’s a news flash for you: there are some nasty types swimming around out there who couldn’t care less about your purity. They’re sharks, and they swim to eat. Ignore the feeding frenzy at your peril; you could be tomorrow’s fish dinner.

Though the idea of talking directly to the gossipmonger is first choice for most people, you could be pulling the trigger too soon. You’ve been on the job for just two months, and where did you end up? That’s right, the cubicle next to gossip girl. Coincidence? Maybe, maybe not. Was it the only space left? Who was there before you? Did he or she quit in haste, get fired, change cubicles?

Before you approach your gossipy colleague, Dr. Conflict asks you to step back and determine the culture of your organization. Are you working in a collegial environment hospitable to a tactful conversation, a minimally politicized place where teamwork and openness

are celebrated? If so, you’re good to go. But if it’s a dog-eat-dog culture, you need to gear up for a street fight.²

One way to get at the culture is to touch base with some of your co-workers. Ask them how they handle conflict, what people should do when they have problems, who are the heroes and villains in the agency. You have to use this approach carefully so that it doesn’t seem like you’re one-upping your gossipist.

A quieter method is to look for artifacts—pictures on the walls, the layout of the office, things that you can see—to get a first impression of the culture. Next, look for a code of conduct or values statement that tells folks how to behave. Finally, try to put all the clues together to understand how you should “perceive, think, and feel” at the agency,³ and “‘how things are’ in the organization rather than how individuals feel about them.”⁴ Knowing your workplace’s “unique way of doing things” is key to deciding how best to deal with your colleague.⁵

In the meantime, shut down the personal stuff. Don’t give out your work number; learn how to say, “I’ll call you back.” When that unavoidable call comes in on your cell phone, hop up from your desk and take it elsewhere. Who wants to hear you talk about that fungus problem anyway? And those work calls that you have to take? Try to keep your voice down and stay on topic.

A newbie doesn’t approach a conflict-laden situation without doing some homework. In a collegial environment, you can collaborate to your heart’s content. But in a pathologically politicized workplace, you have to be one tough cookie to survive, a skilled political maneuverer to win. The bottom line is simple: “Don’t bring a knife to a gunfight.” And you won’t know what to bring until you first understand who’s going to be there and what they’re packing.

NOTES

1. Henry Mintzberg, “The Manager’s Job: Folklore and Fact,” *Harvard Business Review* 68, no. 2 (1990): 166.
2. Workplace typologies are common. Kim Reardon (*The Secret Handshake: Mastering the Politics of the Business Inner Circle*, Currency/Doubleday, 2001) offers the four-frame politicized workplace model from low to pathological. Amitai Etzioni (*A Comparative Analysis of Complex Organizations*, Free Press, 1975) observes three types of organization types: coercive, utilitarian, and normative; Goffee and Jones (*The Character of Corporations*, Harper Business, 1998) find four: fragmented, mercenary, communal, and networked. Different conflict-handling styles are effective for each of the types.
3. Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 4th ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 18.
4. Kim S. Cameron and Robert E. Quinn, *Diagnosing and Changing Organizational Culture: Based on the Competing Values Framework*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 147.
5. Gerald E. Driskill and Angela Laird Brenton, *Organizational Culture in Action: A Cultural Analysis Workbook* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE, 2011), 5.

DR. CONFLICT is the pen name of Mark Light, MBA, PhD. In addition to his work with First Light Group (www.firstlightgroup.com), Light teaches at the Raj Sooin College of Business at Wright State University and the Mandel Center for Nonprofit Organizations at Case Western Reserve University. His most recent book was published by John Wiley & Sons, in 2010. Along with his stimulating home life, he gets regular doses of conflict at the Dayton Mediation Center, where he is a mediator.

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