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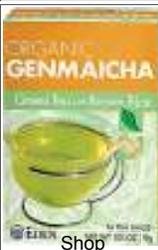
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Research shows link between workplace gossip and office politics



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Gossip at the watercooler can certainly be a fun way to get through a boring day and vent your frustrations about the [workplace](#). But recent research shows that gossip is also a tool that is used in the [office politics](#) of a workplace and can illustrate who has political capital to spend with their loose lips.

"If you're interested in learning how an organization works, you can look at the organizational chart, which can be useful," said researcher Tim Hallett, a sociology professor at [Indiana University](#). "But often people say, 'I still can't tell how things get done, who the prime movers are.' If you're attentive, you can see who has the informal status, which isn't on the formal charts. It can help you understand how work actually gets done."

In order to determine what political work was getting done through gossip, Hallett and his colleagues—sociologists Donna Eder and Brent Harger—observed the employees at an elementary school. At the time, teachers at the institution were adjusting to a new school principal and often felt like their concerns were not being adequately addressed. In order to cope with this sense of powerlessness, the teachers often used gossip to vent their concerns, as they believed the official channels were not open to them to lodge formal complaints.

The gossip that teachers engaged in was not confined to the watercooler and the researchers observed several instances of gossip creeping into business meetings. Out of the 13 meetings that sociologists recorded during their study of the school, they found 25 examples of gossip that occurred during those meetings. In this formal setting, the gossip manifested itself as veiled criticisms of other school employees. According to Hallett, when gossip is interjected into business meetings, it illustrates who has the political power in an organization—and who doesn't.

"When you're sitting in that business meeting, be attentive to when the talk drifts away from the official task at hand to people who aren't present," he said. "Be aware that what is going on is a form of politics and it's a form of politics that can be a weapon to undermine people who aren't present. But it also can be a gift. If people are talking positively it can be a way to enhance someone's reputation."

Research by Hallett, Eder, and Harger can be found in the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*.

(Source: [A weapon or gift: Gossip in the workplace](#). Retrieved November 1, 2009 from 7thSpace Interactive.)

This article originally appeared on my [Workplace Communication Examiner](#) page on November 1, 2009.

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Posted by Kenya McCullum at [August 30, 2010](#)

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