

# Gossip Kills Possibility

by Dan Pallotta

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Like most ten-year-old boys in Boston when ice hockey great Bobby Orr was in his prime, I played hockey and dreamed of being a Bruin one day. I was one of two goalies and my goal-tending partner was this great kid named Mark. Because it's what kids do, I got caught up in making fun of him with a bunch of the other players one day, behind his back. He heard about it and confronted me the next day. He said his feelings were hurt, and asked why I did it. A good question. And wise beyond the years of the average ten-year-old to bring the issue to the surface.

I felt terrible, apologized, and resolved to never ever do it again. It was a pact. Sacred. In that moment a new possibility was created for our goal-tending partnership and our friendship – one in which we supported each other, had each other's back. Real teamwork was possible in a way it had not been before.

Sadly, this kind of honest communication is far more the exception than the norm among kids and adults alike, and extremely rare in our professional lives.

With human relationships, the stakes for communicating with integrity – or not – are life and death. We seem to appreciate this to some degree in marriage or important family relationships, and many of us make an effort through therapy or other means to start talking when those relationships get strained. But even in those cases, it's a struggle to maintain rigorously forthright communication with people. Gossiping to others (or to ourselves, in the form of internal griping) is much easier, and so we often default to it.

In business, for some reason, we don't appreciate that the stakes are just as high, despite the fact that we spend much of our waking lives at work. Think of the amount of energy that goes into people undermining other people – all working for the same company – through gossip, for

example. Indeed, many of us confuse gossip with work! As a good friend of mine says, we think that as long as we're busy, we're working, and gossiping about others can keep you pretty busy. But gossip kills possibility. It kills the business, or at least its real potential, which is essentially the same thing. We end up working harder to undermine our fellow workers than we work to make the business work out in the market place. Competitors couldn't possibly thwart the possibility of our success to the degree we thwart it ourselves.

When we gossip about the leader of our enterprise, we create an organization more committed to her failure than her success. We become constitutionally impervious to her leadership. The gossip becomes self-fulfilling prophecy. When managers bad-mouth production staffers behind their backs, they cannot possibly lead effectively. You cannot lead from a position of dishonesty, no matter how many books on leadership you read. Honesty is the essence of leadership.

The solution to this pervasive problem isn't rocket science – but it's painful: Make ruthlessly honest communication, at all levels, priority number one. It's painful because it gives rise to emotions that have been stuffed under the rug for years. Things that have been held down can put a lump in the throat when they come to the surface. We'd rather not deal with that.

But what comes of honest communication is powerful stuff. Suppose you're a business owner, always anxious about cash flow. You have a great junior manager, but you don't give him more responsibility because you're afraid he'll want more money. You never tell him this. He thinks you don't give him more responsibility because you don't trust him. He bitches to other people about that. You get a reputation for being unable to delegate, when in reality, you'd love to delegate, but you have this fear about money. If you engaged in a formal process whereby you could become vulnerable enough to communicate your fear to the rest of the company, it would transform the situation.

The cost of keeping all of that silent is incalculable.

The shift toward honest communication as an organizational priority takes time. You can't simply outlaw gossip unilaterally, for instance. You have to get the whole organization to want to outlaw it, and then to nurture a culture in which it is unwelcome. You have to get people to see the costs – both on a personal level and on an enterprise level – of their not communicating, or

communicating the wrong things to the wrong people. When people get that the cost of gossip is their own joy, happiness, success, fulfillment, serenity, and money, they might just start trading in the gossip for communication.

True potential cannot be realized unless communication is placed above everything else. That has to start from the top. A culture of communication cannot sprout from the bottom up. And it could never be sustained that way. Embedding good communication throughout an organization means much more than setting an example. It means putting serious time and resources into it. It means appreciating that there is a technology to communication, in the same way there is to data flow. It means hiring experts in those technologies, giving them real power, and setting aside time in everyone's work schedule for training on an ongoing basis, in perpetuity. Because the work is never done. New crap piles up every day that has to be processed and dealt with, with integrity. You would never cancel your janitorial service because they got the place so clean one day you figured their work was done. Why would you do it with communication training and maintenance?

Here is a lever more powerful than capital, stronger than technology, and more effective than the latest management technique. It will create real transformation in your organization. And, if you commit to it, there is pretty much no way to screw it up. Bear in mind, I'm not talking about getting people motivated, or pumped up. I'm talking about getting real, and enduring the pain of getting real.

Our little hockey team got into the playoffs that year. In the critical game, I was playing lousy. If Mark and I didn't have our pact, I would never have admitted it – I would have been too proud and would have worried that making the admission would be perceived as weakness. But in the context that our little pact created, I was able to admit I was having a terrible game, and asked the coach if he would put Mark in for me. He did, Mark played an amazing third period, saved a ton of goals, and we went on to win the league championship. We celebrated with apple beer.

If you want the apple beer, you have to be brave enough to stop the gossip.

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Dan Pallotta is an expert in nonprofit sector innovation and a pioneering social entrepreneur. He is the founder of Pallotta TeamWorks, which invented the multiday AIDSrides and Breast Cancer 3-Days. He is the president of Advertising for Humanity and the author of *Charity Case: How The Nonprofit Community Can Stand Up For Itself and Really Change the World*.

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