

The Poisoned Water-cooler: Workplace Gossip as a Lever of Power
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Overview

Organizations all over the world have in recent years come under increasing pressure to diversify their organizations, and in particular, their upper management.

However, despite some major firsts - like the first woman and Black and Asian woman as Vice President - change is slow to appear overall. The stated desire to change both the way leadership looks, and the way institutions conduct business, does not unfold at the same rate as actual changes to leadership or policy. Most major organizations have instituted best practices, like building recruitment pipelines, expanding mentorship, and creating leadership development programs. However, this has not resulted in the change at the top of organizations that have been so often sought or promised.

One question often asked and discussed with great consistency within management publications is why these diversity programs appear to succeed at the entry level but have diminishing returns as employees rise through the ranks, almost disappearing at the highest levels of organizations.¹

Research suggests, and this talk will explore, that executives may be ignoring a significant piece of the puzzle when it comes to their organizational culture, and cultivating diverse leadership. While there is great, and warranted, focus on official ways organizations conduct business, most of the ways institutions create and perpetuate their culture, and determine who does and does not fit in it, is unofficial.

This paper will explore the impact of one of the most pervasive of these unwritten modes of communicating values - workplace gossip. In particular, examining why something that may seem at first glance unimportant to an executive, is a powerful tool to protect the status quo, stifle innovation, and silence dissent. Gossip uniquely targets women, and particularly women of color, because:

- Leadership remains entirely defined as a male trait, and thus gendered and sexualized gossip attacks women by casting them as not fit to lead
- Tapping into existing misogynistic and racist stereotypes, gossip spreads insidiously, but without revealing or tarnishing the source of the gossip and often by skirting legal boundaries
- Social media has made the extent and impacts of gossip much more significant, by creating an open forum for abuse, which facilitates psychological and physical abuse on and offline

While unofficial discourse can be divided into many categories, this paper will utilize the broader definition of gossip established by Noon and Delbridge in “News from behind my hand: gossip in organizations” as “the process of informally communicating value-laden information about members of a social setting.”² This is not because the difference between different forms of discourse is unimportant, but because this paper is simply meant to begin the process of making executives aware of the broad impacts of unofficial discourse on their organizational culture and their efforts to diversify.

In particular, it will highlight for executives that what they may think is limited to high-profile women like Meaghan Markle and Britney Spears, is in fact happening on a smaller scale to women in all areas of their organization and to women in all parts of public life - academia, journalism, politics, government etc.³

¹ (Gillett and Hoff)

² (Noon and Delbridge)

³ (Bennett)

In particular, we will explore how this works on a day-to-day level to deter or discourage diverse leaders from rising in their organizations, and seeks to help executives understand and mitigate these impacts.

The Role of Gossip in Organizations

Gossip can be a powerful form of coercive power in an organization, as it influences who speaks, how freely they speak, and whether they feel safe in sharing dissenting opinions.⁴

This coercive power can be implicit. By sharing value-laden information, members of an organization send a message to others about how and on what standard they will be judged. In fact, the sheer quantity of gossip implicitly lets members know how aware they must be of how others view their behavior.

The power of gossip can also be explicit. Value-laden information shared about a private meeting, for example, sends the explicit message that members are being monitored and that dissenting views will not be tolerated. Value-laden information that makes its way to an online forum explicitly suggests that the punishment for breaking group norms is public humiliation.

These are particularly important elements to understand for executives who might be bringing in staff to make a directional change for the organization. Because the push for organizational change often happens in bursts, policy changes also go hand-in-hand with changes in the diversity of the leadership team. This well-intentioned move, often has the unintended consequence of focusing organizational anxiety about change on a single person or team of people, who are also demographically different from the rest of the organization.

Gossip is yielded consistently within organizations with the explicit intent of protecting and perpetuating those organizations.⁵ As such, gossip will be yielded against change, both against the policies and the people who bring it.

Specifically, gossip is a coping tactic to address unmet needs, relieve feelings of insecurity or anxiety, and create a narrative that addresses concerns.⁶ This is important when considering the role of gossip in organization change, as insecurity and anxiety are likely to be at their highest when change is underway, which will increase employees' desires to find a worldview that alleviates those concerns. In other words, what the organization does not seek to explain, will be explained for them through gossip.

This effect is even more potent when certain conditions are true. Hierarchical, tight knit, and myth based organizations gossip more than other organizations⁷, both because their structure facilitates it and because being on the outside of such a group carries more social danger. This is significant for executives looking to reform in spaces like the military, and paramilitary organizations like law enforcement and public safety agencies.

These same studies show gossip is less potent when relationship quality is high and more potent when relationship quality is low. This is due to a trusted relationship creating conditions that presume the

⁴ (Noon and Delbridge)

⁵ (Noon and Delbridge)

⁶ (Noon and Delbridge)

⁷ (Noon and Delbridge)

sharing of gossip is not coercive.⁸ In other words, the sharing of gossip between good friends is just fun, but the sharing of gossip between colleagues is meant to be coercive. This is significant for leaders hired in organizations as agents of change or innovation. Gossip about outsiders is far more likely to be potent and frequent than gossip about those who wish to keep the status quo.

Organizations that collectively share all of these traits can be particularly insidious places for this gossip to proliferate, and to become abusive. Traditionally male spheres tend to share these traits, and also tend to feature this type of gossip more prominently than other organizations. The military, and paramilitary organizations like law enforcement and public safety, as well as some well-known technology firms, all feature various forms of unsanctioned online sites dedicated to gossip about their organizations, from blogs, to closed Facebook groups to group chats. This weaponizes nearly all gossip within these organizations, with it appearing both throughout the whole organization and publicly, simultaneously.

A particularly chilling example is “Marines United” an unofficial Facebook group dedicated to the Marine Corps, which was exposed after nude and sexually explicit photos appeared of female cadets - photos crowd sourced from other cadets, romantic partners, and the internet.⁹ However, to think of this as a random infraction of a group of bad actors would be a critical error. This action had a very distinct organizational purpose. The Marines have the fewest women of any branch of the service, and these photos were posted in the same period when women were finally allowed to join the infantry - against deep opposition from the Marine Corps. While the individual actors may not have realized it, they were following a central theme of the purpose of organizational gossip - seeking to maintain group values by showing that the “violation of those values will give rise to the opportunity for judgemental information to be spread about the perpetrator.”¹⁰

In a similar vein, the NYPD recently had their unofficial “NYPD Rant” website exposed after it was discovered that the head of their Equal Employment Opportunity office - the very office charged with combatting discrimination within NYPD - had been posting racist, anti-semitic and misogynistic comments on the site for years.¹¹

While these violations were sensational enough to make the news, and bad enough to be legally actionable, they fit the same pattern that all gossip seeks to enact - to create a chilling effect on those who seek to break group norms. This can be effectuated by any process that seeks to spread malicious information about a person or group of people, which is why these same organizations manage to proliferate numerous similar websites that remain active. In many ways, these remaining sites are more insidious, because they are able to perpetuate anti-diversity narratives without crossing legal boundaries, and thus they remain active and influential.

While the stories in the news covering these scandals focus largely on the infraction, the perpetrator, and the punishment, they don’t account for the wide-spread and long-term chilling effects these phenomena have on the women featured in them, or the women within the organization who could be featured in them. Nor do they account for all the women who observe this behavior and choose never to join these organizations as a result.

⁸ (Kurland and Pelled, 431)

⁹ (Ackerman)

¹⁰ (Noon and Delbridge)

¹¹ (Rashbaum and Southall)

How This Impacts Women in Public Life

Now that we understand how gossip plays a powerful role in organizations, the question remains why this phenomenon is so heavily targeted at women, and how it impacts the trajectory of their careers.

Research shows gendered norms are still pervasive, highly specific, and widely accepted, and breaking them results in social punishment - gossip being one of the main forms of that social punishment.¹²

This discomfort presented by seeing women break gender norms is so pervasive that research shows that when women succeed in stereotypically male positions, and leadership is considered a male position, she faces significant problems of being disliked in ways that impact her career. This is so powerful that even when women are not taking on the characteristics centric to male leadership, the negative outcomes remain true - simply the knowledge that a woman has been successful in a male domain produces social penalties.¹³

Research shows this stereotyping and gendered gossip is so pervasive that it undermines women's interpersonal influence in organizations, making it more difficult for them to get peers and subordinates to believe in their ideas and follow their directions.¹⁴

Social media has taken this leadership conundrum faced by women and created the perfect storm for abuse. A presence on social media is a near-requirement for anyone participating in leadership or public life, despite it opening women up for online abuse that is almost exclusively targeted at women, and is compounded for women of color.

In “Malign Creativity: How Gender, Sex, and Lies are weaponized against women online” the authors dive deep in to explaining this phenomenon. Their interest is, in part, because the tactic is now so common and so effective, that nation states like Russia, China and Iran are utilizing it to silence the voices of female politicians and journalists that speak out against them.¹⁵

In this form of online harassment, they find that gender is at the epicenter of its effectiveness, as spreading sexualized information about women exploits double-standards and thus attacks their credibility and communicates that they are unfit for leadership, or should not be taken seriously.¹⁶ This becomes even more serious when this harassment includes DDoS attacks, spamming and doxing, as well as physical threats - commonly threats of rape.

In a review by “Malign Creativity” of the top words describing female politicians on the website 4chan, the top three words are bitch, sex, and cunt. While these may seem extreme examples, interviews with women in public life prove it to be anything but. In “Malign Creativity” over half of the research subjects were subjected to sexualized disinformation over the course of the two month observation period, with women of color experiencing compounded narratives that also targeted their race.

¹² (Madeline and Tyler)

¹³ (Madeline and Tyler)

¹⁴ (Catalyst)

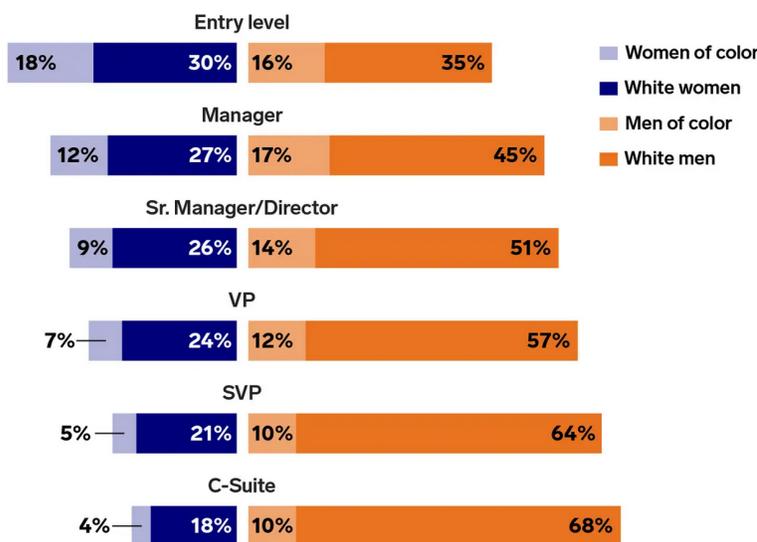
¹⁵ (Jankowicz et al.)

¹⁶ (Jankowicz et al.)

Offline gossip and online gossip have become inseparable problems for women in the public sphere, that result in harassment and abuse - offline and online - that seeks to silence them.

And unfortunately, it often does. Research supports that women withdraw from leadership and public life due to the harassment they receive. This can mean deleting social media and withdrawing from social engagements, to leaving the workforce entirely. In the UK, female MPs have been stepping down at unusually high rates, citing the online and offline abuse that comes with the job, and the toll it has taken on them and their families.¹⁷ The percentage of women in the corporate pipeline also highlights this loss.

Percentage of women in the corporate pipeline



Source: McKinsey & Company, "Women in the Workplace 2019"

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What Can be Done with this Research

Awareness of this phenomenon and its impacts on employees is the first step for any executive looking to bring diversity to their upper ranks. There are many key steps organizations must take to diversify, but expanding their tool box to include awareness of the power of unofficial channels will put them a step ahead in tackling this challenge. Specific actions they can take include:

- Model behavior that discourages gossip.** Research shows that gossip is far less common, and less impactful, when it carries negative social consequences - judgement - for the gossiper.¹⁸ By discouraging gossip of all kinds when it is relayed to or in front of leadership, executives can set a tone for their organization and slow the proliferation of targeted gossip. Public statements made

¹⁷ (Murphy and Perraudin)

¹⁸ (Noon and Delbridge)

in support of laws and regulations meant to stop online harassment can also send a message within their organization.

- **Take swift action on behavior that breaks laws, rules or regulations.** While harassment often occurs outside of employer purview, that which does should be treated swiftly and seriously. The collective impact of widespread harassment must be considered along with individual infractions.
- **Provide external resources for combating online harassment.** Because online harassment occurs anonymously or by people who aren't members of your organization, often there is not direct action an employer can take. However, there are services that help combat online harassment, protect users' private information from doxing, and take legal action on non-employee harassers. Employers should proactively provide these services to women in public positions, and offer them to any woman who is targeted because of her role in their workplace.
- **Take proactive steps to appropriately communicate about female leaders.** As discussed, women face a number of challenges in how they are perceived and received internally and externally in leadership roles. Knowing this, executives should have proactive communication strategies that help to shape, and manage, the public profile of female leaders within their organization. Understanding that women may receive more negative responses to their public engagement than their male counterparts, they should be given agency and input in their own communication strategy.
- **Challenge organizational norms about who fits in leadership.** Our "gut" instincts are meant to teach us what is familiar, and therefore safe. Culturally, both men and women have been taught not to see women as leaders. Given this existing bias, and the knowledge that organizational gossip may further negatively shape views of women's leadership competence, executives should carefully consider how they quantitatively and qualitatively evaluate candidates for leadership positions.

There is an intersection between diversity in leadership, and the ability of institutions to reform, change, and innovate. It is no coincidence that organizations that struggle to change at a policy level also lack diversity in their top ranks. These are not inseparable facts, which is what makes understanding all aspects of organizational culture important, including gossip.

It's also important for executives to understand there are additional burdens women, and particularly women of color, take on as leaders, especially when they are asked to blaze a trail on behalf of organizations. A whole ecosystem is negatively impacting the experiences of these women within their organizations, but outside of the direct line of sight of the executives - exactly as gossip and harassment are meant to work.

Executives who are relying on official channels to combat this type of behavior will remain disappointed. The very nature of gossip is meant to silence dissent, and its insidious nature makes it hard to name or prosecute. Additionally, having spent their careers seeking to be seen as strong against stereotypes that would paint them otherwise, most female leaders will be deeply skeptical about the value of sharing these experiences. The more homogeneous the organization, the more true this will be. Optimistic executives who see some women rise to the highest levels of their organizations might believe their

organizations have found a way to create a safe and successful path to encourage diversity. The truth is far more complicated.

This paper calls upon executives to do the hard work of leaning into their challenges, trying to understand the complexity faced by those who they bring into their organizations, understand the lived experience of diverse, female leaders, and take proactive steps to combat the invisible hurdles preventing this leadership from rising or thriving in their organizations. By doing so, they will be ahead of their industry partners in accomplishing real change in their organizations.

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