GOSSIP NOT

To truly understand the fourth Civility tool Don’t Gossip we need to first recognize that it is worded very differently than the other nine tools. All of them ask us to do a specific action. This tool asks us to not do something. I would propose the reasoning for this is in the nature of the definition of gossip and its full effects on the person who gossips, the listener, and the victim.

By nature we are all curious about lots of things and especially other people. Newspapers, magazines, television, and now social media tell us not only about famous people, but many other individuals as well. Each of us shares much about ourselves as we are comfortable. Still curiosity reigns. While we want to hear the many other good things about a person, we are also interested in the areas where an individual may have had problems.

This is where gossip appears. Gossip is information shared about others that is intended to shed a negative light on them and is not fully true. It works like the children’s game of “Telephone”. One person quietly tells another person something negative or scandalous about another. Next that is shared and shared with others. Along this communication path something may be lost or added and the first statement is never the same. While with the game it is played a few times, soon children see how easily a statement can get distorted. Their conclusion is that it is important to not only state clearly, but get the message accurate. With gossip we tell, we listen and believe over and over again about more victims.

Despite the fact that little truth remains, we want to believe it and take some very real actions. First we make a number of negative presumptions about the character of the victim. Next feeling that we need to protect ourselves, we develop barriers that will keep us safe when we interact with them. Lastly, we will retain them.

Maintaining our gossiping behavior is disastrous to civility. We will continue to add to presumptions and barriers to a larger group of people. With this group we can put away our civility tools. Over time as we are uncivil with more and more people, we may ultimately conclude that everyone has these negative traits and are not to be trusted. All civility tools are put away.

Consequently and remembering that all these tools work together, we need the Don’t Gossip tool. To be civil we need to not participate with gossip in any way. It is not accurate information. It will stray you from truth and understanding. Its intent is to persuade you to believe something unacceptable to you about another person and to turn against that person because of your beliefs.

Truly you cannot totally avoid gossip, but you can prevent their influence. There are published materials that deal primarily in gossip. You simply do not purchase or read these materials. There are TV and radio talk shows that express opinions, but try to present them as facts. These are programs that you can choose not to watch.

Sometimes someone tells you something about another person before you realize what they are doing. When they have finished, state that you do not want to hear anything further not only about this person, but about anyone else. You want to listen to only facts which come only from that person being talked about. Lastly, that you would hope that they would not tell anyone else either.

Next you need to need to come to terms with what you did hear. Remind yourself that this is gossip. You can review what was said and identify all the subjective and inaccurate information. Finally you need to remind yourself that we are all human and imperfect. When you are comfortable, you will able to not repeat what you were told to anyone that you know.

Finally depending on your relationship with the victim, you may want to tell them what is being said about them. The teller may continue their gossip. Only the victim may be able to stop the gossip trail.

Gossip is not communication. While it personally hurts one person, it hurts us all by interfering with civility.

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