

## What Should I Say to People?

When things go wrong, you may not be able to manage the explosive rumor mill around you, but you can avoid accidentally setting off any more sparks.

Since most workplaces (and professions) are not super exciting, you might be the biggest workplace gossip topic for some time. The psychology of gossip is based on a few premises. One is that people want to feel socially valued, and by providing interesting news – gossip – some people believe they will be more valued. The more extreme the news, the more they think they will be valued.

Because of this, most of what you say and do with colleagues – even your buddies -- will be interpreted by either them or others in way that's more negative and much juicier.

- If you say you're "Doing OK," you're in denial.  
If you instead say you've "Had better days," you're depressed and on the ropes.
- If you're dressed casually, you've thrown in the towel and are slumming it.  
If you're instead dressed nicely, you're overcompensating or meeting with lawyers.
- If you have a glass of wine at a reception, you were drunk.  
If you instead drink water, you're trying to control a drinking problem.

In her book *Mobbed!*, Janice Harper's experiences led her to say: "You'll want to explain certain things, to clarify them. But doing so is a big mistake . . . Whatever you say at this stage will be exaggerated and distorted." She contends that even casual conversations with long-time friends can somehow find their way back to the rumor mill in a way that is eventually used to support an extreme and juicy conclusion.

One way to minimize these distortions when interacting with work friends is to follow a two-step plan. First, briefly, vaguely, and genuinely address the elephant in the room by saying something like "Things are moving ahead," or "This has been a rough year but next year will be better." Second, keep the rest of the conversation focused on non-work-related conversation topics, or by asking them about joint interests – kids, vacations, hobbies, and so on.

With nonmandatory work events, here are two approaches people have taken. Many people take the "Don't Go" approach. It's less awkward for both them and their colleagues. Another person, who was eventually acquitted of a highly visible acquisition, used the "Three B" approach: Be early, be seen, and be gone.