

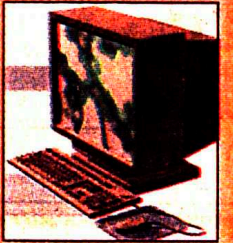
HEARTS OF THE CITY

Exploring
attitudes and
issues behind
the news.

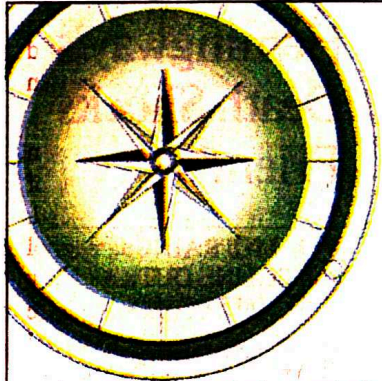
The Beat

Today's centerpiece profiles Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates, a group that helps low-wage laborers achieve better pay and working conditions. For more information, call (213) 738-9050.

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Navigating the Real World



A rotating panel of experts from the worlds of philosophy, psychology and religion offer their perspectives on the dilemmas that come with living in Southern California.

Today's question: Gossiping is such an integral part of the corporate culture that talking about people and repeating rumors about the business or private affairs of others has become commonplace. Is it ever ethical to talk about people behind their backs? Where does one draw a line in talking about people in their absence?

Orli Peter

Associate professor of psychology, Mt. St. Mary's College; director, Marriage, Family, Child Counseling Program

If gossip means only false and malicious statements, then it cannot be condoned. But gossip defined as speaking of someone's personal matters in their absence can be beneficial and healthful if used appropriately. Like storytelling, gossip can permit us to learn from the experiences of others without endangering ourselves. Moreover, gossip can humanize our co-workers and help us to understand them better. For example, if one learns through gossip that a co-worker has recently suffered a personal loss, one may be more tolerant of uncharacteristic behavior. By providing information, gossip can educate us about life's consequences and improve our interactions with others. Like any tool, though, it can be misused.

The Rev. Lloyd John Ogilvie

Chaplain, U.S. Senate; former senior pastor, First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood

Gossip is character assassination. Nothing blights a relationship more quickly than gossip. When someone gossips to you about another person, he or she loses credibility and trustworthiness. There is always the lingering suspicion that he or she will do the same about you. The Spanish proverb is right: "Whoever gossips to you will gossip of you." A sure cure for gossip is never to say anything about another person we have not said to him or her directly or are willing to say within 24 hours. Once that's done, why repeat it? The only reason to talk about another person is to discover how to be helpful. Sometimes we do need a trusted friend with whom we can talk out our feelings. Limit it to one person. But that can never be a substitute for honest and loving confrontation with the person about whom we are concerned. A helpful friend is one who can listen, enable us to clarify our feelings, and then press us to discern what we can do to be creative, instead of critical.

Father Thomas P. Rausch

Chairman, department of theology, Loyola Marymount University

Nothing is more precious than a person's reputation. Damage, once done, is very difficult to undo. We all talk about others when they are not around, but we need to be very careful about what we say. To injure another through disclosing his or her faults without a valid reason (detraction) is to sin against the dignity of the person; to do so by telling or repeating falsehoods (calumny, slander) is to sin both against the person and the truth. It is a failure in both charity and justice. If we have damaged the reputation of another, we have an obligation to make reparation.

—Compiled by K. Connie Kang
Times staff writer