

Grapevine for business

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Rumors and the Workplace

In addition to establishing solid official communication practices at all levels of organizational operation from management to individual worker, organizations and businesses must also deal with unofficial transmission of information, the spreading of rumors, and the potential damage which can be exerted by the workplace "grapevine." No organization or business is immune from the potential damages of the workplace grapevine which can often be regarded, correctly, as "a malignant growth, a poisonous vapor, or an information virus," (Kimmel 3). Taking the analogy further, it is crucial for any organization or business to both thoroughly understand the dynamics of the workplace grapevine, but also to enact policies and procedures which will blunt the possible negative aspects of workplace rumor while simultaneously heightening the positive capacities of the workplace grapevine. It is crucial because, gone unmanaged, rumor, like a disease: "spreads rapidly, is difficult to control, is invisible yet nearly impossible to ignore, and can have damaging and perhaps even deadly consequences." (Kimmel 3)

The workplace grapevine, at its barest level can be regarded as "the unofficial, informal system of communication that functions within organizations in addition to official information networks" (Kimmel 203) and this statement does not, alone, imply wholly negative consequences. What it does imply is the unchangeable reality of the workplace grapevine itself. Since the existence of a workplace grapevine is endemic to all organizations, there is little advantage in attempting to suppress the workplace grapevine. Rather than suppress or attempt to eradicate rumor, the administrative strategy which is most desirable when dealing with the workplace grapevine

is actually comprised of two core concepts: engagement with and management of grapevine communication.

If handled correctly, the workplace grapevine can function as an extra layer of official communication -- and in fact, in many ways, proves to be a quicker, more reliable, and more intensely motivating form of communication than those forms of communication which come through official channels. So there is a potential to turn the negative consequences of the inevitable workplace grapevine into a usable tool for the betterment of the organization. In fact, an organization really has no choice but to attempt to use the workplace grapevine to its advantage since the grapevine is an inevitable consequence of any organization or workplace. In the best cases, "the grapevine can foster employeemotivationand satisfaction" (Kimmel 203) so it is desirable not only the grapevine not be suppressed, " but also encouraged, at least in the sense that the organization's informal system of communication is allowed to survive. The grapevine provides a fast and efficient means of distributing news" (Kimmel 203) which can be to the benefit of management and the organization as a whole.

Before describing methods by which the positive attributes of the workplace grapevine may be harnessed by an organization, it is useful to review the potential damages that an unmanaged workplace grapevine can produce. Foremost, the workplace grapevine holds the potential to exist as nothing more than " malicious, harmful rumors that distort information, create resentment, exaggerate the details of a situation, and work against the achievement of management plans and objectives" (Kimmel 204) which almost always leads to administrative attempts to suppress the grapevine

which, in turn, simply fosters the growth and perceived authenticity of the workplace grapevine itself.

Nowadays, the workplace grapevine, facilitated by electronic communication, exerts an even more potentially dangerous influence, when unmanaged, because " the development in recent years of electronic transmissions of information by fax and e-mail have greatly facilitated the speed with which the grapevine functions," (Kimmel 205) and so there has been a corresponding decrease in the amount of time a manager has to blunt the impact or spread of damaging or false information. In other words, if a workplace rumor which is potentially damaging to an organization or business goes unchecked, it is likely to spread throughout the entire organization or business very quickly which increases the challenges of management to undo any of the falsehoods or misrepresentations which the rumor has caused.

So it is crucial that management, rather than attempting to suppress the workplace grapevine, should instead, " obtain a good understanding of how the firm's grapevine operates, which members of the workforce are especially influential in the network, and the sorts of situations that are likely to stimulate grapevine activity" (Kimmel 206). this is the first step in transforming the workplace grapevine from a potentially hazardous entity to an entity which serves the organization's interests and well-being. By keeping a thumb on the pulse of the workplace grapevine and understanding the particular dynamics: what does and does not go into the grapevine, who does and does not transmit information to and through it -- management

can more adequately redress potentially harmful rumors, and also can send their own information into the grapevine.

In order to more effectively use the grapevine for productive means, it is essential that members of management are able to monitor the happenings in the workplace grapevine with demonstrably useful results; some managers must be able to tune in to "the grapevine without intruding on the communication network's normal functioning or having some other means of gaining awareness that the grapevine is stirring or becoming uncommonly active" (Kimmel 206). In addition to monitoring the information which passes through the workplace grapevine, these "liason" managers will also gain a full understanding of the dynamics of the workplace grapevine and they will then be able to specify which members of the organization play key roles in sustaining the workplace grapevine.

Fortunately, the fact of the matter is that in most organizations and businesses, "many lower level and middle managers already actively participate in the grapevine. These individuals hold central positions" (Kimmel 210) in the workplace grapevine so what is necessary is only a matter of retraining or reconfiguring the methods by which these individuals manage and participate in the grapevine. The first benefit of this participation is that the spread of potentially harmful rumors can be more readily combated by the intrusion of official information which is always indicated when damaging rumors are circulating. the idea is that the management representatives who are tuned into the workplace grapevine can immediately verify when harmful rumors are afoot and then official communication can be mustered, quickly, to disprove or shutdown the

harmful rumors. Timing is key because " the longer a rumor circulates in the workplace, the more difficult it will be to effectively counter it with accurate facts" (Kimmel 211), so simply by being " plugged in" to the grapevine, management stands a much better chance of nipping damaging rumors in the bud. To effectively counter rumor it is necessary not only to respond quickly:

Formal communication channels must be maintained in an open fashion, providing people with the opportunity to obtain rapid clarifications following announcements, responses to questions about impending changes, and whatever else they may need to know to reduce the sorts of uncertainties and anxieties

(Kimmel 211)

In this way, formal communication can be used when it is needed and not simply in a " shotgun" fashion which leads, ironically, to an even greater efficacy and perceived power of the workplace grapevine. In general, the more official communication in an organization is perceived to be pointless, abusive, controlling, or not trustworthy, the greater will be the reliance upon information gleaned not through official channels but through the workplace grapevine. Another factor which causes grapevine communications to flourish and exert influence is the absence of reliable, official communication. Times of uncertainty, anxiety, confusion or doubt in an organization or business which are not met by solid, reliable communication through formal channels almost always give rise to rumor and the increased power of the workplace grapevine.

While official communication when applied with the right timing can do a great deal towards blunting the possible negative impacts of rumor -- the grapevine itself can be used as a method by which management can transmit official information through an informal channel. This latter observation is another reason why the workplace grapevine should be monitored and "infiltrated" by management but never ignored and never suppressed. Not only can management learn to understand the grapevine and its potential for rumor, but management can learn to use the grapevine to its advantage where the same issues of alacrity, perceived acuity, and a sense of individual empowerment are present in communications directed by management itself. In conclusion, the combination of monitoring, infiltrating, redressing, and utilization of the workplace grapevine by management provides a very desirable paradigm for working organizations.

Works Cited

Kimmel, Allan J., ed. Rumors and Rumor Control: A Manager's Guide to Understanding and Combatting Rumors. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004.