

The Rumor Mill – Still Alive and Well

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We often hear things through unofficial channels around the office about changing policies, procedures, processes, people, and many other topics. These juicy tidbits certainly help to stimulate interest and discussion, but are they helpful or hurtful?

Many people would say that rumors usually exaggerate problems and add to employee anxiety level. Certainly, there is much misinformation transmitted through this channel; however, like the gossip magazines on the grocery store racks, there is also usually a small amount of truth embedded in the stories. For this reason, rumors are certainly worth listening to and some degree of reflection. This is especially true when well-connected employees (those who always seem to have the ear of the boss, or have extensive networks of peers throughout the organization) or multiple sources are providing the information. By the way, these well connected people are often the “informal leaders” within an organization. In other words, they have no formal power based on position but command power based on charisma or clout with other people.

The Role of Informal Leaders

There are certain people in many organizations who always seem to know what is going on, what new events are about to occur, and who is coming and going – often before their supervisor gets official notice. These people are the informal leaders and wield a degree of power and influence sometimes greater than members of management. They often gain their stature based on personality and their ability to win the trust of others, who in turn share a variety of information with them.

Because of who these informal leaders are and what they know, smart supervisors often embrace them as a resource. By partnering with these employees, the supervisor is able to more effectively manage the rumor mill and can actually feed and manipulate it. For example, as a manager, I used to test ideas before implementing them. I did this by sharing information with my informal leader(s) and then asking them something like, “How do you think employees will react to this?” Often they would either give their opinion or say they needed time to think about it. In the latter instances, I knew that they were likely talking to other employees and getting their input. Thus, they were informally polling workers for me so that when they eventually shared their views on the issue, I was getting group consensus or rejection.

Managers are not going to successfully stifle or silence informal leaders or the rumor mill and they should probably not try. To do so could alienate the informal leaders and those in their network.

Managing the Rumor Mill

How do you manage the rumor mill? In a word – *communication*. The more accurate information that you share throughout the organization, the less need there is for rumors or people making up their own interpretation of events. Successful organizations use a multi-pronged approach to communication. They use such tools as:

Employee forums with senior management (at least quarterly)

Newsletters

Email announcements

Bulletin Board announcements

Pay check inserts (if paying by checks)

Intranets that allow all departments to post a listing of products, services, procedures, policies, and forms

Departmental staff meetings

Marketing literature

Employee satisfaction and organizational communication surveys with published follow-up results

The bottom line is that a rumor mill is not all bad. It depends on how well it is managed.

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