

How to guide the grapevine

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Your organizational grapevine is alive and well as are most organizational grapevines. It may seem like they have a life of their own but usually they are conceived by someone and then fed for growth and survival by most everyone else. It is very difficult to completely shut them down but you can take some measures to control them. If you don't, they will seriously impact the morale in your organization (and probably in a bad way).

If you're not really doing what your people are spreading rumors about, then you have to take a close look at why they're talking about it. Is there something they're afraid of or concerned about and they believe you'll do it or implement it? If you never indicated you WOULD do the thing they fear, have you ever indicated you WOULD NOT do it?

Years back, when Coca-Cola's Headquarters experienced a rampant rumor of layoffs and shutdowns, James Chestnut, the company's executive vice president, tried to take control of the grapevine by pledging “better and more frequent communication” by all senior managers. It was clear to him that failing to address some of the issues at

hand caused people to derive their own conclusions about them.

How often are you communicating issues to your people? And in what ways? Newsletters, presentations (on line or in person), or simple hallway conversations can help you keep issues straight with your workforce. There are no set rules for frequency and mode of communication so you'll have to properly assess and gauge your people's personalities, moods, learning styles, concerns, and fears to find the right formula for your organization.

Quite often rumors emerge as a response to situations that are important to people, where there is ambiguity, and under conditions that arouse anxiety. Anyone can generate a rumor but its credibility is heightened when an informal leader affects it. Therefore, be sure to know who your informal leaders are because they are instrumental in your control of the grapevine. In fact, a great method to mold the grapevine to your liking is to occasionally have a casual conversation with one of your most trusted informal leaders and in little-to-no time, they'll begin telling others. I used to do this and it worked like a gem.

On one occasion, I nonchalantly told one of my informal leaders something

in the hallway that pertained to important issues within the organization (something I really wanted everyone to buy into and feel good about). As I concluded the hallway conversation, I departed the building on the west side, took a stroll through the parking lot, and reentered the building on the east side. Within 10 minutes of wandering through the hallways back to my office, and excited worker actually stopped me and asked if the “rumor” was true. And of course I said yes! That's how fast and effective the grapevine can be in your favor when you're proactive with it. Likewise, that's how fast and effective it can be when someone else ignites it. So if you can be the initiator rather than the reactor, then you will be the one guiding the tempo and effectiveness of your grapevine instead of constantly putting out its fires.

Embrace your grapevine because it isn't going away. It's an important part of your communication system. View it as both a filter and feedback mechanism that highlights various issues employees consider relevant. So don't succumb to the temptations to squash it, rather, let it flourish with your guidance and influence.

~ The End ~