



Dear Chief

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COLUMNIST

DEAR CHIEF: I’m the manager of a 45-person organization and I’m fed up with the inaccurate rumors in our grapevine. There’s a current rumor that I will be laying people off. This is not true and I’ve never given any indication I’d do anything like that. Why would they really think that? How can I squash the grapevine once and for all?

GRAPEVINE GRINCH



DEAR GRAPEVINE GRINCH: Oh my! Your 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 undermine morale in your organization.

If you’re not really laying anyone off, then why are your people fearing such a thing? You said you never indicated you WOULD do anything like that but have you ever indicated you WOULD NOT do anything like that?

Years back, when Coca-Cola’s Atlanta Headquarters experienced a rampant rumor of layoffs and

Do they really think that?

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. How often are you communicating issues to your people? And in what ways? Newsletters, presentations (online 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.

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 at work (something I really wanted everyone in the organization to know but didn’t implicitly say so). 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, someone 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 initiates it as well. So if you can be the initiator rather than the reactor, then you will be the one controlling 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 squash it, let it flourish!



For an opportunity to have your question, issue or concern addressed in the Dear Chief column, go to www.DearChiefAdvice.com and submit your comments or email them to Jeff@DearChiefAdvice.com.