

Company gossip

Direct communication can stave off rumors

Question:

I'm struggling with our company's "gossip grapevine." I manage a number of supervisors. Several dozen employees report to them. They are spread across southern Wisconsin in different offices. I am constantly reacting to this or that latest rumor. This office is going to be closing. That employee is going to be fired. This customer is going to take their business elsewhere. There is no let-up. Some employees just thrive on this "woe is me" mindset. Nothing is ever right. Every cloud has a dark lining. The glass of water is always empty. I'm distracted and concerned by this. I want to get a handle on it, minimize it or eliminate it. What can I do to nip this, once and for all?

Answer:

At the beginning, let me observe that I'm sure every reader can identify with what you outline in your question. Is there an office out there that does not have an active gossip grapevine? If there is, I've yet to see it.

The gossip grapevine, the informal communication channel of the organization, while a potentially positive mechanism, normally carries negative information (i.e., "the inside scoop") and yields a

negative effect. It is the mechanism by which people share suspicions, pass along rumors, etc. Often, the information on the gossip grapevine has little basis in fact. Rather, it is a reflection of what people perceive is going on.

As you know, perception does not always equal reality. Two people attending the same meeting, for example, may carry away very different perceptions based on their individual frame of reference. You have your experience, expectations, attitudes, interests, values, motives, etc. I have mine. Multiply that by the number of people exposed to a given message and there is great potential for differences to exist regarding the truth.

What can you do to close these perception gaps and help people see things more uniformly? For starters, you need to model the way by showing people that engaging in gossip, no matter how juicy the story, is simply something you do not have time for. In other words, if you don't want your employees to gossip, you must not gossip yourself.

Remember, trust must come first in interpersonal relationships. Without trust, a relationship has a shaky foundation. It is difficult to repair a relationship when trust has been broken because of gossiping, story-telling, talking behind a person's back, etc. So, don't you gossip. Once you are known to be a gossip, others will not trust you. Over time, this can be a career derail.

On the other hand, recognizing that the gossip grapevine is always going to exist in some form or fashion, if you are smart about it, you can use this communication channel to your advantage. Here's what I mean. Any organization has people who are known to be information leaders. They are respected and trusted, sort of like the old television commercial that indicated,

"When E. F. Hutton talks, people listen." So a question worth asking is, "Who are your organization's 'E. F. Huttons?'"

By the way, these folks might not be simply people with formal authority or leadership responsibility. They can be found throughout the organization, at all levels. Find them, wherever they might be situated, and use them to help you clarify the information you pick up off of the gossip grapevine. Because they are respected and trusted by their peers and colleagues, there is very good potential for them to serve as effective counterpoints to the stories that are being passed around. So, enlist these people to help you to get the "rest of the story" out there.

Let me also point out that really effective leaders recognize the formal communication channels that exist in the organization and use them to the fullest. Formal communication can happen vertically (i.e., top-down) or horizontally (i.e., peer to peer). In either instance, formal communication takes place using these modes: (1) written, (2) verbal or (3) electronic.

One general rule of thumb for deciding which communication mode to use is to evaluate how emotionally or affectively charged the message is. The more emotion that attaches, the more personal the communication mode must be, ranging from most (i.e., verbal) to least (i.e., electronic) personal.

It is worth noting, too, that variation exists within each mode. In other words, each mode carries with it levels that are more or less personal. For example, if you are going to announce a highly controversial decision such as closing an office, you might correctly decide that the best way to make the announcement is do so within a large group meeting with all of the concerned parties present. But, given the great emotion that attaches, you might also cor-

rectly decide to augment this large group meeting with a series of face-to-face meetings with the involved work areas/teams and the individuals who comprise them.

In my example, above, let me also observe that such a meeting would properly have been situated via ongoing communication regarding the status of the office and associated contextual issues. We've all heard stories about these kinds of decisions being sprung on people and the negative consequences that result. Better to include people in an ongoing dialog than surprise them, especially on a charged topic like an office closing.

What I am suggesting in this last discussion of communication modes is that there is great power in opening up and accessing the formal communication channels at your disposal.

Think about it. There is great power in getting the word out on a given issue on

your terms. You want to nip the gossip grapevine, right? What better way to do so than getting the facts out accurately from the beginning and reinforcing them with ongoing messages along the way?

So, my advice is to reflect on how you are using your meetings, memos, e-mails, etc. to reinforce the message you want to communicate. Even more effective is the situation where your supervisors are doing the same. This is the definition a "united front." The gossip grapevine will become less active when it is countered by this kind of communication clarity.

Finally, let me note that in our consulting practice, I see many leaders with whom we work who encourage candid, frank discussion via upward communication through regular meetings with their employees. The format varies widely but includes talk-back sessions, informal brown bag lunches, work area summits,

town hall meetings, state of the business updates, one-on-one lunches, and so on.

Want to encourage the withering of the gossip grapevine? The prescription here is to become a savvy communicator using the strategies I outline above. Encourage your supervisors to do the same. Over time, holding yourself and them accountable in this regard will bear a positive return.



Daniel Schroeder,

Ph.D. of Organization Development Consultants, Inc. (ODC) in Brookfield, provides "HR Connection." Small Business Times readers

who would like to see an issue addressed in an article may reach him at (262) 827-1901, via fax at (262) 827-8383, via e-mail at Dan.Schroeder@OD-Consultants.com or via the internet at www.OD-Consultants.com.