

A LINE ON LIFE

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Evaluating Rumors *

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"Did you know that Peggy and Larry are getting a divorce?"

"Did you hear that McDonald's puts worms in its hamburgers?"

"Did you hear that Proctor and Gamble is owned by the Church of Satan?"

These questions assume that certain events are factual, but they may merely be **rumors**. Are rumors harmful? How can you tell if the information is factual?

Two of the questions above deal with rumors that have had national impact. In the summer of 1978, a rumor started somewhere in the Southeastern United States that McDonald's was adding worms to its hamburgers. This rumor — which was absolutely false — had a negative impact on about 20% of McDonald's restaurants. The rumor changed the eating habits of many people. (Can you imagine how you would respond, if you heard this rumor just after eating at McDonald's?) In turn, this temporarily effected the jobs of some of McDonald's employees. Finally, the rumor forced McDonald's to spend a great deal of time, energy and money counteracting the rumor. (Some of you may recall ads at that time emphasizing that McDonald's hamburgers were "*pure beef*.")

In 1981, a rumor started that Proctor and Gamble was owned by the Church of Satan. The "*evidence*" cited was the moon-and-stars trademark of Proctor and Gamble. The company ignored the rumor until the summer of 1982. Then Proctor and Gamble brought a legal suit against several individuals who were attempting to organize a boycott against their products.

When trying to evaluate information as being true or being a rumor, there are some questions you need to keep in mind.

Does the person have access to factual information?

What is the person's motive for passing the rumor to you?

If someone swears that a rumor is true, they may believe it, but it does not necessarily mean that it actually is true. All the person is saying is that s/he accepts it as fact. To make a more accurate evaluation, ask them where they got their information or what evidence they have for their statement. Second or third-hand information is much less reliable than direct observation. ("*My brother-in-law got it directly from his uncle, whose cousin saw it happen.*")

As psychological studies have shown, even direct observation is not necessarily accurate. However, as any information is passed from person to person, it is more subject to errors. This is especially true of rumors.

Before you pass on a potential rumor, you can tactfully *check it* with the original source. Several times in my teaching career, there have been rumors that I was quitting. I only found out about these rumors, because

someone bothered to check them with me. If you can't check the source directly, try reliable governmental agencies, community organizations or the media — mayor's office, Chamber of Commerce, local TV station or newspaper.

It may seem unreasonable that someone would pass on information without attempting to verify it. However, some people simply enjoy exchanging rumors with others. To them, sharing rumors is entertaining.

This brings us to the second question — why is the person passing the rumor to you? Beside the entertainment value, some psychological studies suggest that participation in spreading rumors can give individuals greater **self-esteem**. Not only do they perceive themselves as more knowledgeable, but they also get added attention. People — who want to be better liked — may decide that dealing in rumors will make them more important, interesting and well liked. However, if the information is repeatedly misleading, false or harmful, it will have the opposite effect.

Before giving negative information to others, it is advisable to verify what you have heard.

There is still one more question to ask about rumors. If you have ever shared unverified information with others, you might ask yourself why *you* did it. Do *you* pass on rumors to get attention or be better liked by your peers? Are *you* getting some gain by passing on rumors?

From this article — or from your personal experience — you should realize that rumors or misinformation could be costly in terms of time, money or emotional trauma. The next time a person tells you a potential rumor — gives you unverified, negative information — try to check the information. If you find it is untrue, try to stop the rumor by sharing the contradictory evidence. If you are unable to verify or debunk a rumor — *don't pass it on to others!*

** Adapted from Jon M. Shepard's Sociology, West Publishers, 1984, pages 636-637.*

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