

Excerpts from ...

Managing the grapevine.

by Jitendra Mishra

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Dr. Jitendra M. Mishra, Professor, Seidman College of Business Administration, Grand Valley State Colleges, received a B.A. (Hons.) in Philosophy, M.B.A. (Management), M.A. (Educational Administration), and a Ph.D. (Business Administration), and completed post doctoral work in Instructional Development and tEchnology at Michigan State University. He is widely published in the field and his educational, administrative and research background is extensive. (Public Personnel Management)

The formal network, made up of memos, reports, staff meetings, department meetings, conferences, company newsletters and official notices is highly documented and as such has very little chance for change. However, nearly all of the information within the grapevine is undocumented and is thereby open to change and interpretation as it moves through the network. It often travels faster than formal channels. The grapevine is very useful in supplementing formal channels. It provides people with an outlet for their imaginations and apprehensions as well. It also helps satisfy a natural desire to know what is really going on. The primary objective of this article is to develop a conceptual model to be tested later. The article defines the term rumor/grapevine, discusses reasons for grapevine, explores how accurate is grapevine, type of grapevine, how grapevine is spread, role of various participants and how to manage the grapevine. Dealing effectively with the grapevine is a challenge that will always be a part of a manager's job. Those who are able to understand the power of the grapevine will be better prepared to utilize it to provide stability and credibility in the work environment that is needed in order to achieve organizational goals.

Grapevine is American as mom and apple pie. Grapevine is an integral part of the American political and social system as shown by, e.g. , Iran-contra episode, defrocking of Jim Bakker, Boesky scandal and the demise of presidential hopeful Gary Hart, etc. It is a vital part of democracy, Franklin Roosevelt kept an ear close to it, and Richard Nixon and his plumbers tried to stifle it. What is it? Ignored by some, feared by some and used by many. It is the grapevine. That nebulous, all-seeing, all-knowing network of "truth". If you want to know the real story or the "kernel of truth" tune into the grapevine.

The dictionary gives us a definition for the grapevine which says it is "the informal transmission of information, *gossip* or rumor from person to person" The grapevine is the informal and unsanctioned information network within every organization. "The network helps employees make sense of the world around them and consequently provides a release from emotional stress and all informal information is undocumented." [1] Keith Davis (one of the leading authors on the subject) discovered in his study that organizational Grapevine is an expression of healthy human motivation to communicate: "In fact, if employees are so uninterested in their work that they do not engage in shoptalk about it, they are probably maladjusted." [2] Of all the things that the grapevine has been called, it is foremost--a communications network.

Since it is unstructured and not under complete control of management, it moves through the organization in every direction. "It moves upwars, downward, and diagonally, within and without chains of command, between workers and managers, and even with and without a company." [3]

The term grapevine can be traced to Civil War days when vinelike telegraph wires were strung from tree to tree across battlefields and used by Army Intelligence. [4] The messages that came over these lines were often

so confusing or inaccurate that soon any rumor was said to come from the grapevine. Usually, grapevines flow around water coolers, down hallways, through lunch rooms, and wherever people get together in groups.[5] The lines of communication seem to be haphazard and easily disrupted as the telegraph wires were, however, they transmit information rapidly and in many cases faster and with a stronger impact than the formal system allows.

Location of the Grapevine

Since the grapevine arises from social interactions, it is as fickle, dynamic, and varied as people are. It is the expression of their natural motivation to communicate. It is the exercise of their freedom of speech and is a natural, normal activity. The grapevine starts early in the morning in the car pools. Once everyone has arrived at work, grapevine activity takes place nearly all day long down hallways, around corners, in meetings, and especially by the coffee machine. The peak time of the days are breaks and lunch hour during which management has little or no control over the topics of conversation. In the late afternoon the work day has finished but the grapevine has not. After a short time interval, some employees meet again. They are on company softball teams, golf leagues, and bowling teams. The grapevine at that time goes into full swing again and remains active with one final activity peak at a local bar. The following day, the cycle is repeated. It is the wide range of locations where the grapevine takes place in combination with the fact that grapevine participants come from informal social groups within the organization which points out its difference from formal management communication. Structured management uses verbal messages to communicate through the chain of command, while grapevine communication jumps from one department to another and from any level of management to another. It moves up, down, horizontally, vertically and diagonally all within a short span of time. The grapevine, as communication, can be compared to the organizations formal information network.

Formal vs. Informal Channels of Communication

Every organization has a formal communication system. This formal system provides information regarding the organization to the employees through different media. The formal network, made up of memos, reports, staff-meetings, department meetings, conferences, company newsletters, official notices, is highly documented and as such has very little chance for change. However, nearly all of the information within the grapevine is undocumented and is thereby open to change and interpretation as it moves through the network. "The informal organization is less permanent and less stable (than the formal organization) because its leaders and patterns of action change readily." [6] This occurs because of the dependency of the network on personalities, whereas the formal network is set up through structured policies nondependent on individuals.

Keith Davis did a classic study of the grapevine in 1953. This was followed by an extension of the research by Harold Sutton and Lyman Porter in 1968. Keith Davis stated "the grapevine is a natural part of a company's total communication system...it is a significant force within the work group, helping to build teamwork motivate people, and create corporate identity." [7] The grapevine is the informal passing of information through the organization. It does not necessarily follow the formal structure of the organization and can bypass individuals without restraint. It can be more direct and faster than the formal channels of information since the information is not being screened or controlled.[8] It often travels faster than formal channels. Interestingly, it has been found that the grapevine is equally active both in management and among the workers. The grapevine exists in organizations for many reasons. Grapevine communication can carry useful information through the organization with amazing speed. The grapevine is very useful in supplementing formal channels. It provides people with an outlet for their imaginations and apprehensions as well. It also helps satisfy a natural desire to know what is really going on and gives employees a sense of belonging. As an early warning system, gossip allows people to think through in advance what they will do if the rumors become the awful truth. Subordinates may get an idea of what the boss is wrestling with and may have some suggestions which may help the situation.

The grapevine is flexible and personal and can spread information faster than the formal communication channels. The grapevine is also capable of penetrating even the tightest security because it cuts across organizational lines and deals directly with people in the know. Bosses who chose not to pay attention to the grapevine have 50% less credible information than those who do. Khandwalla states that it exists because of excessive structuring of formal work flows and the excessive channeling of information flows.[9] It is fed by personal apprehension, wish fulfillment, retaliation, and gossip.[10] Surprisingly, most researchers have found that most grapevine information is either true or has within it a kernel of truth.

Reasons for Grapevine Communications

Grapevines exist in all organizations in varying degrees. Gordon Allport describes two conditions as controlling activeness of the grapevine; importance of the subject to the speaker and listener, and the ambiguousness of the facts.[11] He relates the two with the following formula:

$$R = IA$$

Where:

R is the intensity of the rumor

I is the importance of the rumor to the persons communicating, and

A is the ambiguity of the facts associated with the rumor.

This formula, according to Allport, means that the amount of rumor in circulation will vary with the importance of the subject to the individuals concerned times the ambiguity of the evidence pertaining to the topic at issue. The relation between importance and ambiguity is not additive but multiplicative, for if either importance or ambiguity is zero, there is no rumor.[12] This formula is supported by Donald B. Simmons who states it slightly differently. He states "rumors originate, grow, and spread along the grapevine in direct proportion to their importance to workers and the lack of news on a subject from official channels." [13]

How Accurate is the Grapevine?

Allport and Postman's research indicated that "most rumors start as a report of an actual episode - that is to say, with someone's perceptual experience of an event which he deems of sufficient interest and importance to communicate to others.[14]

Once this central theme, the actual episode, has been accepted there is a tendency to distort subsequent news or events in order to make them consistent with the central theme. However, Keith Davis reports from his research "that in normal business situations between 75 percent and 95 percent of grapevine information is correct." [15]

In general people tend to think the grapevine is less accurate than it is because its errors tend to be more dramatic and consequently are more impressed on one's memory than its day-to-day routine accuracy.

In a normal work situation, upwards of 80% of the information that comes over the grapevine is accurate.[16] While the day-to-day accuracy may be good, people believe the grapevine is less accurate because the times it is wrong are more dramatic. A communication may be 90% correct in details but that last 10% is often the most important part of the message. Messages from the grapevine are often lacking in all the details so that the message is subject to misinterpretation; while the grapevine generally carries the truth it seldom carries the whole truth.

An interesting note about the informal communications network is that an estimated 80% of grapevine information is oriented toward the individual while 20% concerns the company.[17]

Allport and Postman discuss, in their book, the changes that occur as a rumor passes along the grapevine. The central theme may be resistant to change, however crucial details necessary for understanding the true situation keep being deleted. (They call the process "levelling. ") At the same time the most dramatic details keep being exaggerated each time the rumor is repeated. (This they refer to as "sharpening. ") So as the rumor moves along it begins to appear as some sort of shrinking missile as it keeps getting shorter and more pointed in flight[18]

This may sound very simple, however we should remember that " the grapevine is fast-paced and generally moves, free of organizational restraints, by word of mouth."

Factors Affecting Grapevine's operation

Several additional factors affect the operation of the grapevine. First, in wartime, the conditions for rumor are optimal. Military events are of the greatest importance. Second, the greater the homogeneity of the organization, the better the grapevine will operate. Third, rumors prosper best where formal communication is poor. They thrive in an environment where employees are not kept informed about anything that may be important to them. Fourth, they perform best in informal social contacts but can operate as effectively as a sideline to official meetings. In a poorly managed organization they can chip away at morale and fuel anxiety, conflict, and misunderstanding.[21] Fifth, people start and spread rumors to enhance their status, fill gaps in social conversations, and avoid suspense over suspected events. [22]This activity increases during times of stress, uncertainty, and in the absence of news.

Frederick Koenig[23], a sociologist who studies rumors, believes that people listen to and pass a rumor because it satisfies some need. This is why the nature of people involved is important. Different people have different needs and rumors ...

- a) may circulate because they are interesting or a source of diversion. The value can be the content of the message or the state of the group.
- b) can pull together events and fill in the gaps to make sense and provide explanations for what is going on.
- c) can validate and support a point of view
- d) reconcile one's psychological state with what one sees as actually going on. (Studies show people who are high in anxiety are more frequent participants in the rumor process and groups in stressful situations have more rumor activity.)
- e) are a means of getting attention..
- f) are a way of manipulating situations. The idea of some person or group deliberately starting a rumor to serve selfish ends is frequently suggested.

Types of Rumors

We will now take a look at the types of rumors that travel the grapevine. But, before we look at the types we should be aware of the two overall classifications that apply to all rumors. These are explained by Roy Rowan.[24] The two classifications are: Spontaneous rumors and Premeditated rumors.

Spontaneous rumors appear during periods of stress and thrive in an atmosphere of anxiety, mistrust, repression of utter chaos. These rumors die as soon as they become irrelevant.

On the other hand, premeditated rumors, as might be expected, are often planted for Machiavellian purposes, particularly in highly competitive environments.

Rumors that fall into both classifications have been witnessed travelling along most companies' grapevines. However, the spontaneous rumor is seen most often as facts are pieced together to explain an occurrence.

Research has determined that much of what the grapevine carries is rumors. These rumors can be concerning any practice or policy of the company or about any person in the company. Rumors can be divided into four (4) categories. The first category is that of the "wish fulfillment or pipe dreams:"

Pipe dreams or wish fulfillment - these express the wishes and hopes of those who circulate rumors and these are the most positive and they help to stimulate the creativity of others. Often solutions to work problems are a result of employees verbally expressing desire for changes. These improvements sometimes result in increased efficiency for certain departments within the organization. Even though the tone is positive they still represent employee concerns.

The second category is that of the "anxiety," or "bogie," rumor:

The Bogie rumor - comes from employees' fears and anxieties causing general uneasiness among employees such as during budget crunch. In this case, employees will verbally express their fears to others. These rumors are sometimes damaging, such as a rumor about possible lay-offs, and need a formal rebuttal from management.

The majority of rumors fall into the category of the "aggressive rumors," or "wedge drivers," or "Motel Six" types of rumors:

Wedge Drivers - divide groups and destroy loyalties. They are motivated by aggression or even hatred. They are divisive and very negative rumors. They tend to be demeaning to a company or individual and can cause damage to the reputation of others. A wedge driver rumor may be someone at x Company saying that v Company serves worms in their hamburgers; or in another context, a school-age child telling friends that another child has AIDS, or some other tale, like "Louise, the office manager, was seen the other day alone with that young new accountant. They were in a car together leaving Motel Six." or one may spread the word that "Mary got the promotion because she is sleeping with the boss." Women are more likely to be attacked with the sexual gossip.

Home-Stretchers - These are anticipatory rumors. These rumors occur after employees have been waiting a long time for an announcement. There may be just one final thing necessary to complete the puzzle and this in effect enhances the ambiguity of the situation.

Now that we have discussed why the grapevine exists, the accuracy of the information on the grapevine and the types of rumors that exist, we will look at how the message is spread and those who participate.

How is the word spread?

Within the organization communication chains exist. The chain used by formal communication may be very rigid, following the chain of command or authority. However, the chain used by the grapevine tends to be very flexible. Four different chains/structures appear to dominate the grapevine network according to Keith Davis are:

1. The Single Strand Chain This is a simple concept to follow, A tells B, who tells C, who tells D and so on. Each person passes the information on to the next person. The longer the strand the more distortion and filtering affects the information being passed until the last person in the chain may find the information

unrecognizable from the original message. Most inaccuracies occur in this chain.

2. The Gossip Chain: In this illustration A simply tells everyone with whom they come in contact. This pattern is considered to be somewhat slow in moving the information.

3. The Probability Chain: In this case A makes random contact with say F and C and passes on the information. They in turn randomly contact others in accordance with laws of probability. Some hear the information and some don't. In this structure, there is no definite pattern of communication. Information is randomly passed along to anyone willing to listen. They type of person who communicates in this manner might be a very outgoing and talkative type of individual.

4. The Cluster Chain: Here A tells contacts, B and F, who may work with A. They may tell two or three other persons with whom they usually have close contact. Most predominant pattern is the cluster pattern. Selectivity is the basis for this pattern. In any organization, individuals will generally feel more comfortable with some fellow employees than with others and therefore only relay information to those in their informal social groups. This flow pattern results in information missing some individuals completely.

Roles of the Participants

In addition to identifying certain structured patterns, research has also given us some other facts and descriptions, It has been discovered that only 10% of all the individuals in an organization are highly active participants in the grapevine. The types of individuals relative to rumors, have been identified. The three are bridgers, baggers, and bearers. Most employees fall into one of the three (3) basic categories as they relate to the grapevine.

1. Bridgers or Key Communicators - Bridgers or key communicators receive and pass information to others. These people are the ones primarily responsible for the success of the grapevine. Bridgers[25]--are the passers-along; the liaisons of rumors, also called KC's, as explained by Sutton. "Key Communicator" is the term that is given to this type of individual who is responsible for initially sending information into various networks.

2. Baggers or Dead Enders - Baggers hear rumors but do not pass them along or fail to tell others. They are called "dead-enders." They receive information but do not pass it on or only pass it on to one or maybe two other dead-enders.

3. Bearers or Isolates - Bearers, or isolates, are not privy to any information, do not hear the information and thus cannot pass along, a rumor. They tend to be outside the grapevine. They neither hear nor pass along the information.

Each type of individual can easily be identified in the communication mains previously illustrated. It should also be noted that people are more active on the grapevine when their friends and colleagues are actively involved.

After all that has been said about the grapevine the next questions that arise are: What should the company managers do about the grapevine? Is it good or bad? Should the managers participate? How do we manage the grapevine?

Management's Response to the Grapevine

The key thing to remember is that the grapevine exists, William A. Delaney reminds us of this when he says the "grapevine exists, always has and always will, and you can't stop it." So managers should accept the fact and decide how they can use it to their own benefit.

Vanessa Arnold contends that "Managers interested in creating effective organizational communication will use information from the grapevine to improve communication throughout the firm." [26]

The real value of the grapevine should be in revealing to management those issues that generate from the grass roots. As Donald Thompson said "its usefulness is seldom acknowledged, its voice often muffled, its insights ignored." [27]

Should Managers Participate?

In many cases lower and middle managers are already active participants. They hold strategic positions in the communication channel because they filter and block two-way communication between higher management and operating employees. [28]

Managers basically have three options when it comes to their participation in the grapevine:

1. Ignore the grapevine, be no part of it. This is difficult in most organizations, but can be accomplished. They do their job and let it operate unnoticed around them. In effect they become an "isolate. "
2. Participate only when it serves their purpose. In this case they may seek out the grapevine and tap it to learn what is being said concerning a specific situation or issue.
3. Become an active and full-time participant.

Coping or Managing the Grapevine

Since the grapevine cannot be held responsible for errors and is somewhat of an unknown, managers sometimes succumb to the wish that it will go away; but we have learned from experience and research that "homicide" will not work with the grapevine. It cannot be abolished, rubbed out, hidden under a basket, chopped down, tied up, or stopped. If we suppress it in one place it will pop up in another. If we cut off one of its sources, it merely moves to another one...It is as hard to kill as the mythical glass snake, that, when struck, broke itself into fragments and grew a new snake out of each piece. In a sense, the grapevine is a human birthright, because whenever people congregate into groups, the grapevine is sure to develop. It may use smoke signals, jungle tom-tome, taps on a prison wall, ordinary conversation, or some other method, but it will always be there. Organizations cannot "fire" the grapevine because they did not hire it. It is simply there.

Positive Aspects

Even though management does not always view it favorable, the grapevine has several positive aspects. One major advantage of the grapevine is that it is a release mechanism for stress. Bottled-up feelings have been proven to have negative side effects for individuals and the grapevine helps to ease this type of situation. We know individuals like and need to talk about their work. It's an important part of one's life. The grapevine provides a soapbox for individuals to talk about this important facet of their lives. In talking about work, the grapevine gives employees the opportunity to convert official company policies into their own language or jargon. In doing this, individuals are better able to understand the policies and are better able to cope with their work environment. This open communication also enables employees to have empathy for those who are occurring stress outside of the work place. As stronger personal bonds occur among workers, a greater spirit of team work exists within the organization.

Because of the speedy transfer of information, the grapevine enables individuals to prepare for and think through management's goal changes and goal adjustment in advance of any formal statements. This increases

the contributions of employees. The grapevine also helps employees to remain efficient by quickly spreading the news of disciplinary action. If tardiness is a problem and one person is given a day off without pay, will management be able to remind everyone immediately of company policy? Probably not. Will a memo from the Personnel Department reach everyone that same day? That isn't likely to happen either. However, will the grapevine make sure everyone's at work on time the next day? oh, yes!

Additionally, the grapevine is a good indicator of health, morale, trends, and productivity. The grapevine reveals issues and problems being discussed by the employees; the effect of policies and procedures upon which the employees can be measured. Managers should have some means of tapping into the grapevine. The grapevine is also a means of communication which a manager can use for efficiency. Via this method, desired information can be circulated quickly to a large group of subordinates. Control of the grapevine is an understated responsibility of the manager. While all the information passing through is not initiated by management, management is ultimately responsible for its accuracy.

Management Options

Internal rumors are generally managed differently than external rumors if for no other reason than management of a company has more control over internal formal communication than over information sent out to the external environment.

Since grapevine activity increases during times of uncertainty, management must provide information through the formal system of communication about key issues and events that affect employees. Management should supply employees with a steady flow of accurate, timely information; in this way, the potential damage caused by the grapevine can be minimized. Any attempt to soften or distort a rumor to make things look good is not a good way to deal with the rumor. The longer a rumor circulates the more difficult it is to control. Facts should be released quickly. The grapevine can be controlled with prompt, clear, and accurate information on the issues important to the employees. Full facts must be presented. Formal communication lines must be kept open and the process as short as possible. Direct memos, large group announcements, and intercom systems should be used. If employees perceive management is giving them the facts, they will be less anxious and less emotional when rumors are heard.

Although the preferred management option is prevention, this never works 100% of the time. In other words, there will be negative rumors and if one wants to manage them, one ought to be prepared. So when prevention doesn't work, and it won't, what can one do? Two methods are suggested. First, a four-step method, and second, a disciplined three-phase management program. Generally, in the four-step method, four steps are suggested:[29]

1. Seek to keep employees informed about what is going on. A formal company newsletter always seems to help.
2. Heed rumors. Listen to what is being said that is 80% true. What other information source is so highly credible?
3. Act promptly. Rumors are more difficult to correct over time because they "harden"--the details become consistent and the information becomes publicly accepted,
4. Conduct a training program for employees on the nature of rumors.

For the wedge drivers and the bogies, although prevention is the preferred method of management. This will fail sometimes. When it does, a rather disciplined, three-phase management program can be used incorporating both the tapping of the grapevine and the active management of the formal communications channels.[30]

Phase I. Active gathering of information regarding the rumor.

1. Ascertain extent of rumor's circulation. Can you be at a distant friend's retirement party and hear a bad rumor about your company. ...or...Do you merely receive a roomful of laughs when you walk into your service club's monthly meeting?
2. Collect facts. Recalling that 80% of rumors are true, corporate leaders at Upjohn discovered that rumors about massive kickbacks to foreign governments by its international division were true. It is thus wise to look, or at least know, where one is leaping.
3. Assess sources of uncertainty and anxiety. Rumors are a product of someone's anxiety. That rumors in response to uncertainty, it seems logical to determine what the uncertainty is all about.

Having done all of Phase I, make a decision as to whether the rumor will die on its own merits or whether it will continue to the detriment of the company. If it is decided that the rumor will continue, proceed to the second phase.

Phase II. Prepare for a public response through the development of an information dissemination plan.

1. Prepare a formal response, With external rumors, the company does not control the channels of communication. This is left to journalists, reporter, and announcers. Preparing a formal response that provides an opportunity to access the various mass media is absolutely crucial to even getting in the front door, front page, or six o'clock news.
2. Begin work on preparing an information dissemination plan. This plan is to directly counter-attack the public rumor, now generally to the point of public fact, in a direct and intentional way.

Before proceeding to Phase III, review again whether the rumor will die of its own weight, silliness, or irrelevancy, or really is becoming a nuclear cloud over your company, It is to the point of not being able to go away on its own, you may decide to implement the plan developed in Phase III.

Phase III. Implement the plan.

Besides the above two methods, i.e., a) four-step method, and b) a disciplined three phase management program, the authors feel that tapping of the grapevine is also important. First of all, management can try to identify and make use of key communicators. Management can leak out important information to key communicators or bridgers who actively transmit information. By participating, management can monitor what is happening in the organization and discover the reactions of its employees.

The grapevine can be used to see how a new idea will be received. If feedback through the grapevine indicated an unfavorable reaction, management can reconsider the idea or alter it to lessen employee resistance. If the new idea is incorporated, management will be forewarned of problems and can be prepared with new programs to help overcome anxiety and misperceptions. In short, as an early warning system, rumors allow management to think through in advance. John Kotter, a Harvard Business School professor and author of "Power and Influence, " gives an example of a manager he knows who uses the grapevine to give new ideas a "trial-run" before spending a great deal of time and money. "He knows who in the office has the longest tongue," explains Kotter. He then casually mentions this new idea to the employee and waits for the word to spread. In no time, responses find their way back to his secretary, who gives him a full report. Feedback is very important, and if it is positive, he goes ahead with the new plan. If the feedback is negative, it's back to the drawing board to rethink the idea and pinpoint the problem areas. The simple, cheap way to

check an idea can be invaluable to a manager.

Some organizations create a rumor hotline or rumor control office. [31] When an employee hears a rumor he can call the rumor office to check it out. By providing this service, bad rumors can be replaced with good rumors. Good rumors, such as "I asked about that and was told it wasn't so," move just as quickly through the grapevine as bad ones, and can increase morale, help build teamwork, and increase motivation.[32] Dealing effectively with the grapevine is a challenge that will always be a part of a manager's job. Those who are able to understand the power of the grapevine will be better prepared to utilize it to provide stability and credibility in the work environment that is needed in order to achieve organizational goals.

Notes

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