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Paying attention to the grapevine

Have you ever noticed how cruel teenagers can be to other teenagers who are different?

The same question can be asked about adults in the workplace. An important action for managers is to stay in touch with the organizational grapevine and not ignore it. The grapevine can positively or negatively influence a culture.

The grapevine is informal and accessible to all employees who are listening. The information on it often includes universal themes (e.g., the managers here are terrible), rumor (Did you hear what John did?) and stories that may or may not be true about why something happened.

The grapevine is fueled by both facts and assumptions. One important fact for all managers to keep top of mind is the grapevine is efficient and fast for distributing information throughout an organization – often faster and with more interest and attention than official formal communications.

It's important for managers to pay attention to negative gossip because it's never harmless, may breach an individual's confidentiality, and has no benefit to the organization or people in it.

Negative gossip can condition people to be less trusting and cause anxiety and if left alone can snowball and become unyielding.

A manager can intervene and often demystify gossip simply by adding facts to the grapevine to tame untrue gossip.

Managers need to keep in mind though gossip is just talk it can be a form of bullying and can damage some employees' self-esteem, morale and loyalty.

Grapevine Test: To evaluate if the current grapevine facilitates more positive or negative information, evaluate for five workdays, without judging or correcting, the percentage of information that's positive and negative.

A general rule of thumb is 70 per cent to 90 per cent of conversations in organizations are negative. In such cultures there's more complaining, frustration, stress and disengagement than in those where this same percentage of time conversations are positive. The point is, there's often a correlation between the grapevine and the attitudes of employees.

What managers can do facilitate a positive grapevine:



- First and foremost, a manager needs to be a role model. Talking negatively about employees in front of other employees is not acceptable. A manager's role is to be objective and not judge people.
- Track the grapevine by keeping a record of its common themes and messages. This will provide a frame of reference to confront gossip when appropriate.
- Take a stance on gossip by promoting that it is destructive to the workplace climate, employees' health and productivity, and encourage employees to pay attention to how much negative gossip they are getting caught up in and to disengage from it.
- Teach how gossip works. For example, human behaviour research suggests that what people complain most often about others is the individual's greatest weakness.
- State the expectation people are not to engage in negative gossip as it is counter to the values of the organization. Begin the process of using progressive discipline with serious offenders, starting with verbal warning and then if need be a written warning.
- When appropriate in staff meetings, talk about the grapevine and make the point of the alternative ways people can deal with their concerns other than through negative gossip. Teach that it's important to learn to address concerns with the people you have them with or escalate your concerns to management so a peaceful resolution can be found.
- Teach and role model positive gossip. Celebrate and talk about the good. One benefit of this positive strategy is it can promote how people can obtain more acknowledgement and recognition through sharing of good news.

