Grapevine: the Informal Transmission of Information

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Abstract

In a workplace, the employees/managers share a common environment and develop friendship with the people they work with and often chat with them about their colleagues and the organization. Most of the employees become inquisitive to pass on the important facts of some confidential information to their close friends who in turn pass it on to their friends and thus a chain is formed which stretches like a web all over an organization. We can say that the information through grapevine is generally overheard which spreads like fire within and outside the organisations. Generally, we assume that no one is going to know what we said, but in a grapevine it is but obvious that the information that one is passing on and on becomes known to all in an office, company or an organization. Such rumors and other information which is carried throughout organizations in an informal manner is grapevine communication. This kind of communication network can turn out to be useful as well as harmful for an organization. The present paper reflects on the procedure of information transfer through this fast communication network, its common dwelling places in an organization, its positive and negative aspects.

Keywords: Grapevine communication, informal, gathering, gossip, rumours, information workplace, problem, solution.

Introduction

Grapevine is defined as "the informal transmission of information, *gossip* or rumor from person to person." The term grapevine can be traced to "Civil War days when vine like telegraph wires were strung from tree to tree across battlefields and used by Army Intelligence." (306) Through these grapevine like wires the messages during battle were sent in a hurry, therefore, the received messages were haphazard and confusing like the gossips and rumors in a workplace. Information through grapevine usually travels faster than formal channels. To say that such rapid transfer of information occurs only rarely would be wrong if we look at the functioning in workplaces. They spread quickly, uncontrollably and, once started, are often hard to stop. In the present age of technology we may compare gossip and rumors in a workplace with computer viruses. Like the computer virus gets transferred from one system to another and contaminates files and systems; in the same manner gossips and rumors travel from sender to receiver passing on the negative rumors, thus contaminating a healthy work environment. The primary objective of the present paper is an attempt to project the role of grapevine communication, reasons of its existence, how it is spread, role of various participants, its advantages as well as disadvantages and how to manage the grapevine. Grapevine communication exists in the gatherings like lunch or tea breaks etc. These gatherings have a communication which is informal in nature. This type of communication may take place in haphazard manner. Also, the gossiping flows without any instructions or guidelines i.e. the participants of the gossips do not need to follow a certain mannerism or rule on what to talk and how to talk. They are free in choice of their subject matters and in the way of expression and diction. As grapevine is an informal network, the communication starts out innocently and may lead to serious issues- but in an informal manner. Usually, the focus is on promotion or transfer of other employees. The talk may highlight the errors and flaws of their colleagues. The participants of the communication generally enjoy the talk. The interest of the participants in this informal communication jumps from one department to another and also from one level of management to another. It may be right to say in this context that grapevine communication is so powerful and active that it covers all the flows of communication- be it upward, downward, horizontal or diagonal. We can say that it is equally active both among workers and management. It is a rather humorous here to say that generally female gender is known for gossip but in a workplace males too play an important role in becoming active channels of the grapevine.

Since the grapevine communication remains informal and undocumented, there are always a chance that information is misleading, or the interpretation id

manipulated. The information provided in this type of conversation may or may not be true; it may be devoid of the actual facts. The participants in this transmission are generally seen keen and greatly involved in the procedure. This natural desire of human beings to know what is actually going on around and passing the message on and on sometimes creates havoc within an organisation. Now-a-days the use of technology like e-mail, internet and chatting have added and extended the grapevine network. During work hours, some employees spend most of their valuable time chatting with friends and thus transferring important information from one person to another and so on. This new technological shape of grapevine is harder to manage. It is a very dangerous method of gossip delivery as messages are easily forwarded to unintended receivers as well.

Knowing the fact that the activities like gossiping and spreading rumours are really fatal to the progress and development of any organization, that it obstructs the healthy working and environment of any workplace, question arises- why does it exist in a workplace? Khandwalla answers this question by saying: "it exists because of excessive structuring of formal work flows and the excessive channeling of information flows" (256). Gossips and rumors occur in a workplace is usually linked to the lack of communication channels- up, down, and across the company. The preferential treatment given to some workers also becomes a major reason for grapevines as this segregates the other employees from the formal channel of information transfer. Such participants initiate the grapevine communication to gain attention and project their importance of knowing confidential matters. The participants deliver important facts just to boast off themselves. Such news if delivered to others provides a momentary feeling of superiority to the spreader. And this reason for transmission of information goes right for what Donald B. Simmon says: "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." (39)

The environment becomes really hostile and clashes develop among the colleagues when the participants spread and pass more of negative comments especially about the private and personal affairs of others. These sorts of negative message may tarnish someone's image, embarrass and hurt his emotions. The hurt and embarrassed person in turn may desire to escape by withdrawing from family and friends. Gossips also give way to mistrust amongst employees and become a major cause of conflicts. The conflicts in a group can negatively impact teamwork. The gossipers are unaware of the fact that gossips and rumors spread by them may lead to great blunders and may also give way to grievances among the employees and also against the management which may further take the shape of industrial

disputes and disloyalty. It may also give way to formation of unions etc. which later on becomes a threat to the organization. Moreover, we must have noticed that at times, for instance during budget crisis some employees are gripped with uneasiness, anxiety and lack of self confidence. In such a psychological state they express or babble their fears verbally to others which take a massive form and enhance the ambiguity to the situation. It may be said that greater are the stressful situations among employees, greater becomes the frequency of rumors. In this context it would also be useful to refer to an article by Alan Zaremba that the 'grapevine' or informal communication network in the organization can "have negative effects such as resentment, embarrassment for managers, distorted messages, rumor diffusion, and subversion of managerial decision-making." The recession period also adds fuel to fire. When the jobs of employees are at risk, they are seen here and there in groups-sharing their fears with each other. They are worried about losing their jobs and their anxiousness and insecurity gives way to gossip and rumors. Thus it is observed that during times of uncertainty, employee gossip is at its peak. And it is important to respond quickly. If unchecked, it may lead to misunderstandings which may give way to conflicts and spoil the effective working environment.

Gossiping and spreading rumours are the parts of human nature. These activities may be found anywhere and everywhere. We cannot deny the fact that these are inevitable in everyday life and work. Though in managers' eyes, grapevine is a green eye monster which should be killed as soon as possible, it is also true that it may never be put an end to. It is an ever existing and continuously flowing phenomenon, reason being simple that wherever groups or people congregate, flow of information becomes obvious or we can say that it is human nature to communicate informally. Grapevine cannot be stopped but can be controlled. From the employee's point of view, if one feels that he is being victimized and is getting trapped in the network, he can avoid it by simply walking off, thus avoiding negative personalities. One can also avoid the situation by changing the topic or by keeping a direct approach and clarifying doubts. And at the administrative end, some companies define gossip policies. If not, it is the manager's job to tackle the challenge intelligently and effectively. The management can either ignore the grapevine or be a part of it by making use of the grapevine for the benefit of company. They can do this by identifying the people in the organization who are the keys to the information flow and feed them information that they want to spread to others for the welfare and benefit of the company. In this context one can also ponder on the four-step method suggested by Nofel in his essay "Cultivating the Office Grapevine":
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.

If one looks at the other side of the coin, the grapevine has some positive aspects as well. It becomes beneficial at a psychological and emotional level in satisfying the natural human desire to know what is going around. "The network helps employees make sense of the world around them and consequently provide them release from emotional stress" (39). As we are conscious that grapevine communication spreads faster than formal communication, therefore, it becomes useful in spreading any disciplinary action i.e. one must know how to make use of grapevine wisely. The management can take the feedback through grapevine and also help in settling the employees' anxieties and a peaceful work environment can be created. Through grapevine the management can also become alert in advance regarding any arising problem in the company. Replacement of bad rumors into good rumors can also be helpful. According to Keith Davis the grapevine "is a natural part of a company's total communication system….it is a significant force within the workgroup, helping to build teamwork, motivate people and create corporate identity" (272). To add to this, grapevine also becomes a channel to strengthen personal bonds among workers which helps in increasing creativity and productivity. It may be concluded here that those people who understand the power of grapevine utilize its benefits properly and also be prepared to manage the negative effects of the grapevine. If ignored, the grapevine can create havoc within a workplace thus reducing reputation and productivity of a company.

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