

## Rumors at Work

### Managing and Preventing Them

Rumors. If you haven't been a victim of one, you probably started or (at the very least) contributed to spreading one. The whispers when a colleague is fired. The knowing looks when two co-workers begin "stay late to catch up" on the same evening. The emails back and forth guessing at which department will suffer the largest budget cuts.

It's nearly impossible *not* to become involved in gossip at work. After all, people like gossip and interesting bits of information. Browse through any magazine rack and you'll notice that we apparently have a huge appetite for learning about and discussing the details of other people's lives.

At work, however, this type of interaction is harmful and costly. It wastes time, damages reputations, promotes divisiveness, creates anxiety and destroys morale.

I think our hard-wired need to make sense of what's happening in the world around us makes us start and spread rumors. To understand what's going on, people talk to one-another. And, together, they fill in the holes in the story with a little bit of fact and—since some people don't like to admit to what they don't know—a lot of guessing. This new story spreads, with bits and pieces added along the way, until there's an out-of-control rumor spreading throughout your company.

#### Why Rumors Start

Rumors often grow because people like to be "in the know." Knowledge is power, and that's why the people with the least amount of power in an organization can often be the ones to start and spread most of the rumors. It can make them feel important if they're seen to know things that others don't.

This knowledge is at the center of why and how rumors start and spread. Insufficient knowledge or incomplete information is often to blame. For example:

- People don't know why a colleague was fired, so they make up a reason based on some limited knowledge or insignificant fact. "I saw John override the cash register the other day without a supervisor present. Maybe he stole some money and got himself axed."
- People know that budget meetings are being held, and they're all behind closed doors and kept very quiet. To help these people deal with the stress they try to gain some control and predict the outcome. "When Steve came out of the budget meeting today, he looked really angry. The other day he said he was super-nervous about his presentation to the board. I bet he made screwed the pooch and had his budget cut."
- People see a pattern of behavior between two individuals and they add their own explanation. "Joseph and Samantha spend a lot of time together after hours 'catching up on paperwork.' And just yesterday, they were sitting awfully close to each other in the meeting. I bet paperwork isn't all that's getting done after quitting time..."

Some rumors, like the last example, take on a more personal tone. These are generally what we think of as *gossip*. Gossip tends to be related to interpersonal relationships, and is often malicious in nature. It can get out of control quickly, and should be addressed promptly – before it leads to harassment or bullying.

These rumors are typical of the things you'll face at work, and they spread because of a lack of accurate information. So, ***the best way to fight rumors is with good communication***. When you communicate well, your team knows what's happening, and they trust that you'll keep them informed. Good communication within your team also means that you will become aware of any rumors that are starting and you'll be able to address them quickly and effectively.

Dealing with rumors requires a two-pronged attack. First, you need to set up an environment where rumors are not as likely to start. And secondly, you need to establish a pattern of open communication that allows you to remain aware of what's being said.

### **Preventing Rumors**

- **Keep workers informed.** When workers know what's going on within an organization they don't need to guess as much. Use newsletters, weekly meetings, or regular updates via the intranet to let people know what's happening.
- **Communicate.** When you face adversity in your business, keep the lines of communication open. This is when distrust and stress are likely to be highest. Whether it's communicating during a crisis, dealing with a shrinking team, or managing during a downturn, it's fundamentally important to communicate clearly.
- **Be open and honest.** When you can't reveal all of the information about a certain situation or event, admit it. People are not stupid and they know when they aren't being told the whole story. Cut-off the rumors from the start by explaining that you'll provide more information after you have all the details.
- **Establish transparency within your systems.** Develop a promotion process that's clear and fair. Hold meetings behind closed doors only when absolutely necessary. Share industry reports and company performance data. The more people understand, the more they trust.
- **Practice *Management By Wandering Around*.** The closer you are to your team and to other workers, the easier it is to communicate information and the greater the sense of trust. This also gives you an opportunity to hear rumors when they start, instead of only after they're out of control.
- **Let people know that rumors are unacceptable.** Establish a policy for dealing with rumors and gossip. Outline what you'll do to prevent rumors from starting and address how you'll deal with the people who engage in this behavior. Talk about the effects of rumors in the workplace. The more that people understand why the behavior is damaging, the more they'll be likely to monitor their own participation.
- **Build a culture that promotes cooperation rather than competition.** Putting people in direct competition with one another for rewards and recognition creates an opportunity for conflict and resentment. This lays a foundation of distrust between people and departments and it allows rumors to start and grow. It's a good idea to monitor the level of competitiveness within your organization on a regular basis, and then make adjustments as necessary.

## Managing Rumors

- **Deal with rumors immediately.** Rumors can spread quickly and they can often change and grow far beyond the small bit of truth that caused them to start. When you hear of a rumor, talk to the people involved. When appropriate, hold a meeting to address the rumor and then communicate the truth. Again, if you can't provide all of the details, be honest—and restate your policy about rumor and gossip in the workplace.
- **Set a good example.** When someone comes to you with an "interesting" or entertaining tidbit of gossip, refuse to get involved. When you hear a story from someone other than a direct source, ask questions. Do what you can to find out the truth. Talk to your boss about what you heard. Again, this keeps the lines of communication open between different channels and it helps stop rumors.
- **Watch for patterns with rumors.** If a certain type of rumor continues to spread this may mean that you need to provide more information or more regular updates. If a particular person seems to start or spread rumors often, address the situation directly. Rumors affect productivity, so you should deal with rumors and gossip directly as *a performance issue*.
- **Regularly audit your rumor behavior.** Encourage your team to do the same. Think about what you might have done over the past month or two to inadvertently spread rumors. Ask yourself why you participated. Prepare a plan of action so that you'll be less tempted to get involved in the future. If everyone holds themselves a bit more accountable for rumors in the workplace, their frequency and their potency will diminish.

Rumors at work aren't likely to disappear. It's human nature to want to know what's happening around us, and when people don't have complete information, they may fill in the gaps with suppositions that may not be accurate. Fortunately, a little bit of accurate information goes a long way to stop the need to spread rumors.

Focus on open, honest, and regular communication. It's also important to build a culture of mutual respect and integrity. Rumors are spread by people, so you can stop rumors at the source by talking about the negative effects of rumors and gossip, and by outlining your expectations. You probably won't ever stop rumors completely, however, you can use these strategies to create more harmony and trust within your work team.

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