

Grab Hold of the Grapevine

The grapevine. Faster than a speeding memo. More powerful than a posted notice. Able to span entire buildings in a single day. Here's how you can use your operation's grapevine as a fast, favorable communication line direct to your employees

by Judi Brownell

YOUR OPERATION'S GRAPEVINE is an informal and spontaneous communication network that is fast and mostly accurate. When an event occurs, your workers spread the word via the grapevine much faster than any manager can disseminate it through memos or notices. As a result, negative information that gets into the grapevine can be extremely harmful, whether it is accurate or not. In this article, I will discuss what you should know about how grapevines work and how you can manage this

informal network to create a healthy communication system, rather than one that undermines your organization.

To illustrate the power of a grapevine, consider the following hypothetical situation:

January 16, 1990, 9:00 AM.

Mitch Wendall, the manager of the Santa Fe Starlite Resort and Conference Center, dismisses the property's F&B division manager and the rooms manager. Julie Farrell, the F&B manager, had worked her way up from hostess at the dining room during her eight-plus years with the company.

Rooms division manager Joe Morris was one of the best-liked managers at the resort. Employees frequently took their problems to Joe.

Word of the firings spread through the property fairly quickly, once the word filtered out of the executive office. Karen Jiminez, the assistant front-desk manager, was the first to learn that the two had been asked to resign when she overheard a phone conversation between Joe and the general manager at 11:15 AM. Immediately, all members

Judi Brownell, Ph.D., is an associate professor of communications at the Cornell School of Hotel Administration.



of the front-desk staff began whispering about the news. At noon, Karen had lunch with Lori, a member of the house-keeping department, and Doug, a management trainee working on banquets. When Doug went back to his station 40 minutes later, he immediately shared his information with Marge, the assistant chef, and three cooks. Meantime, Lori, upset at the thought of losing her supervisor, wasted no time in reporting the news to her colleagues.

In each of these communications, the employees asked the same questions of each other. They wondered why these two managers would be let go. In the absence of any formal communication about the sudden and unexpected event, employees began immediately to speculate about the answers. These speculations were carried by the grapevine along with the original news. High levels of anxiety about the situation and its wide-spread influence on other organizational members contributed to the speed

with which the grapevine was activated. Employees wondered, "What impact will this change have on me? Is my job secure?" Let's continue the scenario, picking up with the next morning.

The Mismanaged Memo

January 17, 1990, 10:00 AM.

Employees receive a memo from Mitch Wendall stating that there had been "important developments" requiring personnel changes. He announced a staff meeting to be held on the morning of January 18. The memo concluded: "We realize everyone is anxious to know more about these developments. Rest assured that all decisions are in the best interests of our employees and our guests. We will give you the information we have available at tomorrow's meeting. Thank you in advance for your cooperation." Obviously, the general manager's memo did nothing to fulfill the employees' need for information about the management changes. Within 24 hours, over 87 percent of Starlite's employees had heard some version of Karen's original story. Wendall thought he was communicating effectively, but his was, in fact, far

behind the employees' information network. The grapevine's speed caused his memo of January 17 to appear inappropriate and out-dated, especially since the employees would have to wait yet another day to hear the official details.

Mitch Wendall could have used the grapevine to his advantage, if he understood its nature, its participants, features, and purposes. Let's look at how grapevines function, and then return to the story of the Starlite to see how Wendall could have done a better job of communications management.

Understanding Grapevines

The term grapevine arose during the Civil War, when intelligence telegraph lines were strung loosely from one tree to the next. These lines suggested grapevines and, since messages from the lines were often incorrect or confusing, any rumor was soon said to be "from the grapevine."

One of the central features of a grapevine is the speed with which information travels. Keeping up with the grapevine is like trying to package fog.

Researchers agree that a grapevine consists of informal and spontaneous communication that is built around your operation's social relationships. It has little connection with formal organizational positions or relationships.¹ It is important to understand that the grapevine activates in response to a situation, not a person. Moreover, given the right circumstances, anyone is potentially a grapevine participant.² Grapevines are particularly active in times of change when individuals experience high levels of anxiety and stress.

Employees' connection with the grapevine falls into one of three categories: liaison, dead-ender, or isolate. A liaison, as you might expect, receives a message and passes it along to others. Lori, who heard about the management lay-off from Karen, wasted no time in passing the information on to several members of the housekeeping staff. In most businesses, about 20 percent of the employees are liaisons. In the hospitality industry, this percentage may be higher due to the large number of informal contacts among employees. Traditionally, individuals in staff positions who move from one department or area to another function as key liaison persons in the information network. Dead-enders hear the information, but they don't pass it on. Isolates neither hear nor transmit the message.

One of the grapevine's central features is the speed with which messages travel. No matter how fast computers whisk information from one department to the next, the grapevine seems to be steps ahead. As Hunter muses, "Keeping up with the grapevine is somewhat like trying to package fog."³

¹G.D. Pozgar, "On the Grapevine," *Health Care Supervisor*, January 1986, pp. 39-49.

²B.E. Wooten, "Organizational Communication: The Channel vs. the Grapevine," *Management World*, March 1981, pp. 39-40.

³B. Hunter, "Rumors: Pruning the Office Grapevine," *Today's Office*, October 1983, p. 75.

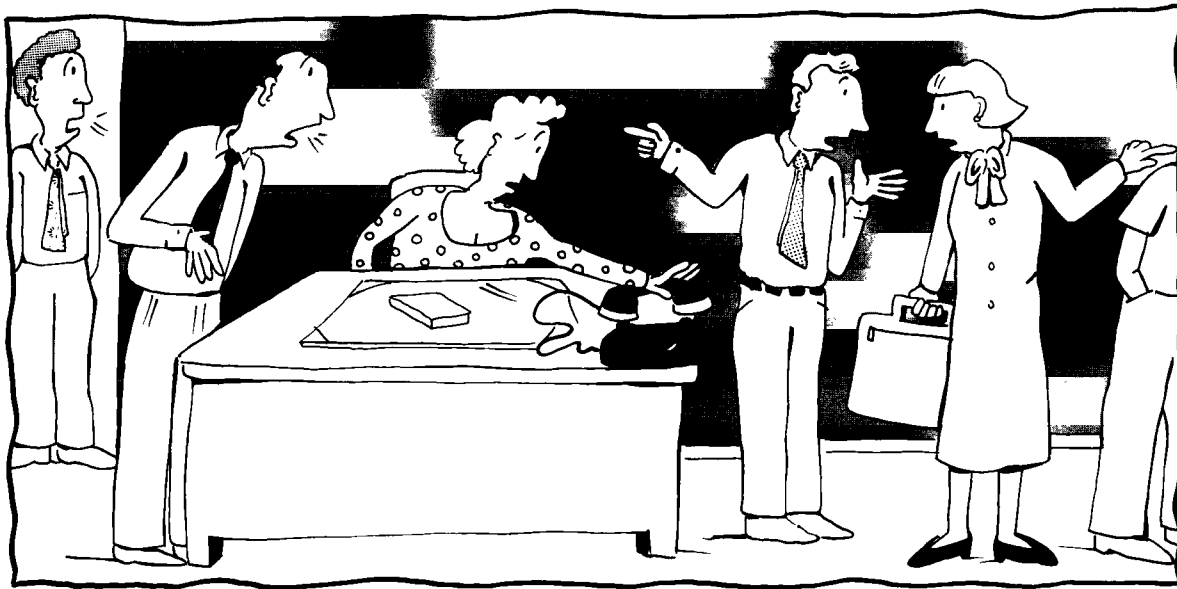
Although the term grapevine is associated with rumor, up to 90 percent of a message's details are usually accurate.⁴ The problem is, the small portion of inaccurate information is often critical. The true story of a waiter's recent marriage illustrates this point. The grapevine in an 800-room hotel became particularly active one day, as employees heard that one of the waiters was marrying the GM's daughter. As you can imagine, the story spread quickly throughout the hotel's departments. As with most grapevine reports, the story was at least 90-percent accurate. It had the right date, the right location, the right details of the wedding arrangements, and even the right name for the bride and groom. The one piece of information that was incorrect was that the bride wasn't actually the GM's daughter. She just happened to have the same last name.

Grapevines do suffer from message distortion. As each individual hears information, he or she interprets it in light of unique past experiences, self-interests, expectations, and job requirements. Information is lost, and facts that are missing are often recreated by various individuals as they move the story along. Recipients unconsciously focus on and relay only the information that reinforces their pre-existing attitudes while filtering out conflicting information. Because of this, each additional relay can cut the number of details in half while doubling the distortion.⁵

Although the grapevine is known for its inaccuracies, employees are likely to believe what their peers tell them in a face-to-face encounter around the water cooler or in the restroom before they

⁴D. Simmons, "The Nature of the Organizational Grapevine," *Supervisory Management*, November 1985, pp. 39-43.

⁵L.D. Solomon, R.B. Stevenson, Jr., and D.E. Schwartz, *Corporations* (St. Paul, MN: West, 1982).



believe an official statement from “the management.” Suppose Karen Jiminez suspected that Joe Morris was dismissed because the GM’s son had just graduated from hotel school and was ready to move into a management position. If Karen had mentioned her hunch as part of the message she set in motion, it would tend to linger in her colleagues’ minds long after they were given a quite different story at the January 18 meeting.

The Need to Know

The grapevine serves one of several purposes for employees. In some instances, it helps make sense of a situation—to fill information gaps and clarify confusing or ambiguous situations. In other cases, access to the grapevine signals power or status. Those who know what’s going on have the upper hand and are viewed by their peers as desirable contacts. In addition, researchers have found that the grapevine helps to perpetuate an organizational culture by reinforcing basic values, assumptions, and expectations. (This culture, however, may or may not be the one promulgated by top management.⁶)

⁶Robert Woods, “The Culture of the Restaurant Industry,” *The Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, 30, No. 2 (August 1989), pp. 82-97.

Much of the company’s history is communicated through the stories that ultimately shape member behavior.⁷ As one author notes, “Whispers behind closed doors influence our attitudes about ethics, etiquette, and just about everything else.”⁸

Although such whispers are inevitable, perhaps the most frequent cause of an active and potentially disruptive grapevine is lack of complete and accurate information that is not readily available to the entire group. Pozgar explains that the grapevine becomes active when information is regarded as confidential, when formal lines of communication are inadequate to disperse it, or when it is the kind that would never be formally disclosed.⁹

When organizations are in transition (e.g., when new equipment is soon to be installed, when there are shifts in schedules, when a new manager has been hired, or when an expansion or renovation takes place), employee anxiety and uncertainty are particularly high. In this type of environment, there is a pressing need for immediate information, and the grapevine is

⁷Simmons, p. 41.

⁸R. Brody, “Gossip: Pros and Cons,” *USAir Magazine*, November 1989, pp. 100-104.

⁹Pozgar, p. 40.

almost certain to be active. If informal networks are ignored during times of uncertainty and change, the grapevine is likely to carry negative or inaccurate information that will ultimately affect both morale and productivity.¹⁰ In contrast, if the grapevine is properly managed, it can be one of your most useful tools. As Davis warned over 35 years ago: “No administrator in his right mind would ever try to abolish the management grapevine. It is as permanent as humanity. It should be recognized, analyzed, and consciously used for better communication.”¹¹

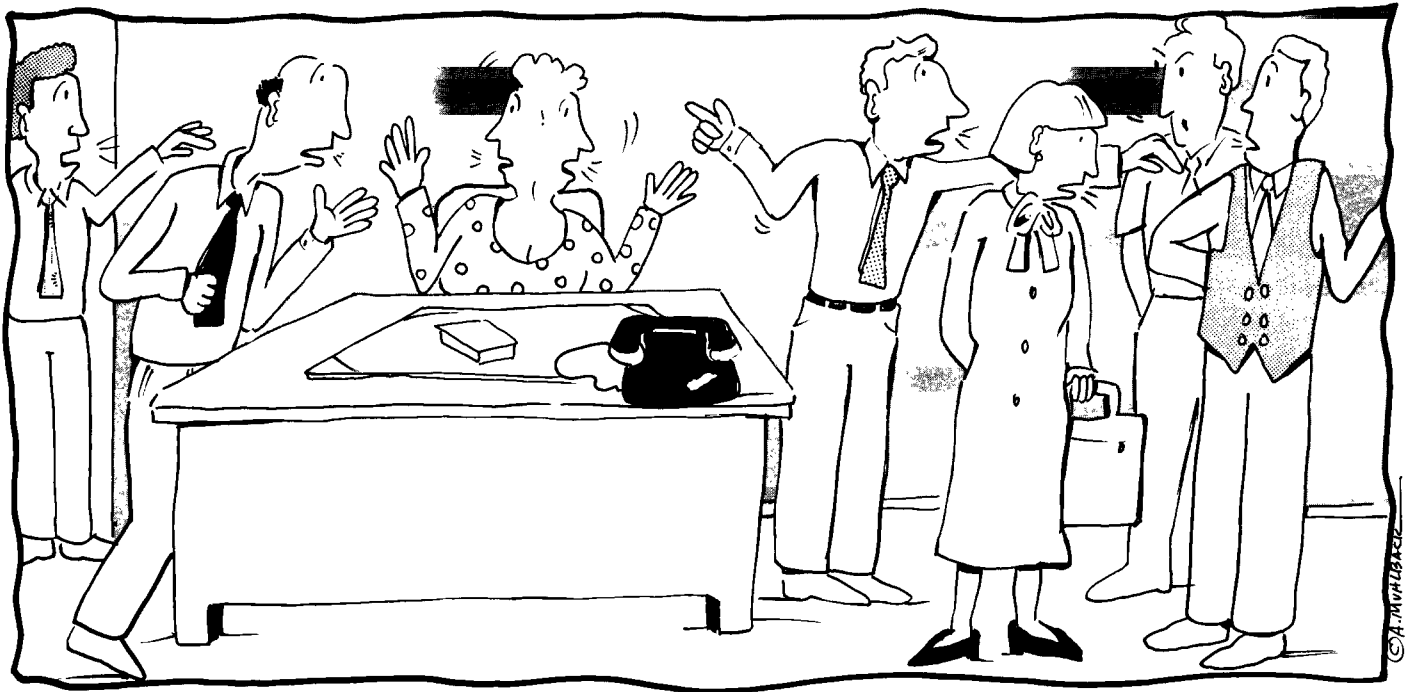
When you’re under stress and bombarded with information from all directions, it’s easy to feel like a victim of your organization’s many communication systems. But you can make the grapevine work for you if you just give it a little additional care and attention.

Influencing the Grapevine

Managers often find it difficult to shift their focus from formal memos to the

¹⁰J.L. Esposito and R.L. Rosnow, “Corporate Rumors: How They Start and How to Stop Them,” *Management Review*, April 1983, pp. 44-49.

¹¹K. Davis, “Management Communication and the Grapevine,” *Harvard Business Review*, 31, No. 5 (1954), p. 43.



organization's informal systems. Nevertheless, you must develop strategies for effectively communicating with employees on a continuing basis. To do this, you foster the development of communication networks.

Developing networks. One researcher observed that developing strong and dependable informal networks requires "new attitudes, new philosophies, patience, sincerity, and genuine concern on the part of management."¹² When informal networks are supported and valued, managers are able to create better working relationships and develop work environments where morale and job satisfaction are high. A well-cultivated grapevine can improve employee relations, increase organizational loyalty, and increase trust.

Here's how to begin. First, remember that the grapevine's activity is largely predictable because it is sparked by specific incidents. You know that employees talk most when there is recent news that directly affects their work. You can, therefore, be prepared to tap into the grapevine and

¹²Wooten, p. 40.

influence its operation as soon as a significant event occurs. You also know that the grapevine is always ready for operation, so your daily relationships with employees will affect their perceptions of you and of the information they hear.

Provide Information

First, tell your employees what they want to know, and not just what you want them to know—and tell them fast. You drop information into the grapevine by identifying the key liaison people, those who have substantial contact with different departments. They will spread the word and also correct false rumors. They will do this for you because of the pleasure they receive from being the bearers of tidings.

People need information about things that affect them as soon as possible. Damaging rumors can be prevented by keeping employees well informed. Never hesitate to release good news into the system. Positive information immediately raises morale. Information heard through the grapevine also gets employees' attention. You can double the impact of good news by

first releasing it through the grapevine and, soon afterwards, sending out a more formal announcement. If an employee has done a particularly good job or if sales are up, don't just write a memo. Discreetly pass along the information to a couple of key employees as you walk around your department. Then go back to your keyboard and pursue the formal channels.

By providing accurate and reliable information, you boost your credibility. When you interact with your employees daily, you project an image of yourself as someone who sincerely cares about them.¹³ By presenting both positive and negative information openly and honestly, you will have virtually open access to the grapevine when you really need it.

You must also be accessible to the grapevine liaisons, so that employee concerns can be addressed in a timely manner. If you share information, others will reciprocate, and everyone will stay well informed. Listening to the grapevine also gives you immediate feedback

¹³H.B. Vickery III, "Tapping into the Employee Grapevine," *Association Management*, January 1984, pp. 59-63.

regarding messages other managers and employees are sending about your actions and decisions.

Soliciting opinions and ideas from the employees facilitates a positive climate and contributes to shared perceptions. It gives you a chance to spread your view of the organization's culture, and often allows you to identify potential problems before they become serious. Rumors often begin with one individual's personal complaints. Consequently, managers who are close to their employees are in a better position to identify and remedy individual problems before they are sent along the grapevine.

The Starlight's Grapevine

From this discussion of grapevines, you could now give Mitch Wendall some advice on what he should have done. Obviously, he lost his grip on the grapevine and completely ignored the informal communications network. I like to use the acronym PASS for summarizing how to use a grapevine.

- (1) Predict employees' response to news;
- (2) Answer all questions as soon as they arise;
- (3) Share information quickly and openly; and
- (4) Stop relying heavily on memos.

Mitch Wendall should have expected that his actions would quickly activate the grapevine, that employees would be upset at the news, and that the potential for misinformation was high. Since the employees' responses were predictable, he could have prepared his staff for his actions before he took them. He might have begun in December by mentioning how the property would need management restructuring. He could have discussed the obvious benefits of potential changes. He certainly would have talked about how secure the line employees' jobs would be no

matter what. The grapevine would have carried these remarks through the staff long before his plan was put into action.

During the weeks between his initial comments and his planned execution date, he could have chatted with various line employees, such as those at the front desk, those in the kitchen, and the bell staff, to hear whether they were expressing any anxiety or confusion about what they had heard. By listening to conversations in the back of the house and in the employee cafeteria, he would gain a better understanding of what his employees needed to know. By soliciting further questions and discussing his vision for reorganization, he could have built a sense of trust and confidence for his action plan.

By the time Julie and Joe were relieved of their jobs, the entire staff would be aware that something would happen. The shock would be reduced, and perhaps the two who lost their jobs would have seen the handwriting on the wall and have made plans for a move to another property. When news of the firings went out on the grapevine, the message would simply confirm what everyone already had heard, and a staff meeting would be nearly unnecessary.

Getting a Grip

The way to deal with your company's grapevine is to keep a firm grip on it—not to pull it down, but to feel its faintest vibrations. This informal channel is valuable for influencing employee attitudes and perceptions, and it's critical for conveying information to you. By PASSing information through your organization via the grapevine, you will remain in touch with your employees. You will understand their concerns, and you will have the opportunity to squelch rumors long before you have to sit down and compose a memo. □

To get hold of the grapevine, practice dropping information into it.