KING FAHD UNIVERSITY OF PETROLEUM & MINERALS

A
RUMOR
MANAGEMENT
STRATEGY

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INTRODUCTION

Good morale in the office or at a worksite is usually the result of mature-minded workers who cooperate to reach a common goal for the organization. However, when good morale and cooperation degenerate into conflicts of personality, these conflicts block the smooth running of work, and the company's goal is not reached. One major cause of such problems is rumors.

CAUSES OF RUMORS

Managers and supervisors should know what causes rumors and how to avoid them, and when rumors begin – how to stop them. As most managers know, rumors usually start during everyday situations, then grow and speed along the "grapevine" [informal communication]. Regardless of the source, it is important to manage the damaging effects of rumors before they get out of control and upset objectives, workflow and productivity. At the same time, though, the manager must be knowledgeable about the causes of rumors and why they started in the first place.

In my own work experience in New York City, Florida and Los Angeles, the most frequent source of rumors was related to the personal life of an employee (including the boss) or a customer. Other frequent topics, according to a study at Arizona State University, include job promotions, salary payments, vacations, contracts, and general working conditions.

Additional studies suggest that anxiety and uncertainty are the keys to rumors spreading because employees feel insecure or threatened when they do not know their present and future condition clearly – and they lack facts and input about their individual situations from supervisors. [Thus, there is the need for communication between supervisor and employee.]

The lesson learned is that the more stressful the situation for employees, the greater the amount and frequency of rumors. In these cases, the manager's need to reduce anxiety and uncertainty become more important and urgent. The rumors, of course, are usually baseless (no real facts involved) because of lack of information. But, the mere communication of them between some employees and co-workers becomes an emotional/psychological release for those who are suffering from anxiety and uncertainty about their jobs.

NEGATIVE & POSITIVE

In the Gulf Area, where socializing is an integral part of the job culture, there is always a lot of time and opportunity for discussions. As a result, the topic usually turns to rumors of some kind. These stories are usually exaggerations and do not include facts – BUT they are very damaging when the information is negative because they destroy motivation, productivity and satisfaction on the job.

That is when rumors are negative. Sometimes, though, rumors can be positive. (For example, when financial information about high profits is "leaked" to the press, or a true report about future employee bonuses is circulated in the office "unofficially" by word-of-mouth). Positive rumors, in fact, can boost morale and increase loyalty, productivity, motivation and satisfaction on the job.

Regardless of the source, it is vital to manage
the negative effects
rumors cause before they get out of control
and upset the path toward objectives,
smooth workflow and productivity.

When negative rumors are spread throughout a department or entire company, however, the skillful manager must step into these situations of uncertainty and must deal with them quickly and completely.

He must become the OFFICIAL SOURCE of FACTUAL INFORMATION.

In this regard, here is a helpful 5-point strategy involving prevention and coping to keep morale high and to avoid the negative results of rumors:

RUMOR MANAGEMENT: A 5-point strategy

1 **Establish a Prevention Strategy.** This is the best approach. Try to set up a "hot line" telephone in the public relations or HR office, for example, that connects troubled or confused employees with the truth about the problem or situation. The director can receive employees' calls and provide factual responses (after he consults with the manager, if necessary). This preventative approach, however, is not always possible so managers must be prepared to cope with rumors and their effects once they start up in the company.

2. **Keep Employees Informed** Whenever possible, in writing or orally, inform employees about programs, projects and other events which will affect them and their jobs. Newsletters, memos, and informal oral briefings are excellent methods. They can be the "official" words on the subject and prevent rumors from starting.

IMPORTANT: Tell the truth and do not exaggerate or lie for short term benefit. In other words, do not talk falsely! This is the way that rumors start in the first place.

3. **Accept and Provide Feedback** Once a rumor begins to cause problems in productivity and morale, make the "grapevine" work FOR you. Talk to some workers and ask for the source of the problem, according to them and their knowledge of the situation. This way, a manager can determine the causes of the rumor. This will lessen employees' fears and uncertainties. Accept their feedback and provide answers.

4. **Take Action Quickly** Since rumors become stronger and more difficult to stop over time, it is very important to act quickly before the false information is repeated so many times that it becomes accepted as truth. Do this in the following way: Only provide the complete facts without repeating the false information itself, if possible.

5. **Pay Attention to the Causes** If this strategy is to be effective, then it is essential to analyze the causes of the rumor and prepare a campaign of information to let employees know that you are aware of their problems. This approach and attitude will go a long way toward eliminating the roots of the rumors before they can cause severe problems and get out of control.

CONCLUSION

Lastly, knowing these tips and following the advice and suggestions above will help you to become a more effective manager when rumors start to fly in your company. You will know why they are happening, what the wrong things are to do, and most importantly what the right things are to do so that your business continues to be productive and your people stay motivated and satisfied.