

Managing the workplace rumor mill: 4 ways HR can tame the beast

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Say a long-time VP leaves your organization without warning. Suddenly, everyone is abuzz. Why him? Why now? What does this mean for me?

Unexpected and unexplained events can spark rumors among employees. If ignored by HR and the management team, rumors can take on a life of their own, hurting productivity and morale.

It's natural for employees to assume the worst. But there's an art to dealing with rumors and it involves timing: You must know when to act and when not to.

The solution: Don't worry about a single rumor that occurs in isolation and dies in a few hours or days. But do pay attention to rumor patterns that begin to emerge. They may signal a deeper problem than the subject of the rumor, and they may be worth discussing with the top dogs.

Pay attention to signals

No cookie-cutter solutions exist for dispelling rumors. The only rule: Do it fast. The longer rumors are allowed to circulate, the more damaging they become. Four tips:

1. Take note of subtle changes in the atmosphere. When your usually bustling workplace becomes quiet and conversations halt when you walk into a room, beware. Dispel the mystery by asking employees directly "What's going on?" Listen and respond.

2. Announce upcoming changes, whenever possible. Unexplained surprises breed rumors. Whenever possible, keep employees informed of changes that could affect them. If you can't tell employees ahead of time, expect rumors to spread and ready yourself to manage them.

Stay particularly alert in situations that breed uncertainty, but be equally candid about the type of information you can (and will) share. Refuse to indulge in the rumor.

3. Head off rumors at the pass. Establish a reputation for having an open and above-board style. If employees believe you'll be straight with them, they'll be more likely to come to you for answers and less likely to indulge in speculation. Couple that with an open door that is truly open, and you'll avoid 99 percent of the problems.

If a big rumor brings work to a standstill, consider a meeting or a memo to bring everyone up to speed or to quash the rumor.

Example: If you know the organization isn't about to be sold but that's all anyone is talking about, bring employees together (maybe during an already-planned training event), so they all hear the same thing at the same time.

4. Tap into the grapevine. Make sure you're never the last to know. Fine-tune your "radar" and question employees if you suspect that rumors might be developing. Rumors grow when information is scarce. If employees know they can trust you to keep them informed, they'll have no need to invent answers themselves.