

Grapevine is undermining internal communications

By [John Bradfield](#)

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Many employees are relying on the grapevine for important company information despite millions of rands being spent on internal communications.

"Pssst... do you want to hear what's going on? Let's go to the water cooler where no one can hear us talk." If you work in a big organisation, you'll most likely recognise this conversation. It occurs every day somewhere in company corridors where management still needs to appreciate why it's important to let employees know what's going on.

Despite a proliferation of internal communications media in the modern office environment and leadership mantras that implore managers to communicate with employees, the grapevine is often the main source of news that touches on what's really going on. The grapevine grows especially when top management tries to keep a lid on what it considers to be "sensitive" information. It's concerning because the grapevine, although a rapid carrier of "news", is generally unreliable as a source as information is passed on from person to person. Grapevine generated news can possess the bias of the person who broke ranks from the inner circle to spread their version of the "truth".

People working in smaller companies or even retail shops with a few employees may sneer at big companies where the grapevine is so prevalent. You'd think communication would be more rich and frequent in smaller businesses but it's not a given. Often employees in smaller firms are starved of information because the boss keeps things close to the chest and sees no need to keep employees informed.

The possible reasons why many employees are still relying on the company grapevine include power, politics, unwillingness to manage sensitive news and sometimes not knowing any better.

But one might ask, "Why does the grapevine flourish when companies today employ internal communications staff?"

Part of the reason involves company culture. Where there is support for common understanding, shared beliefs, and innovation information tends to flow more freely. In companies where a culture of mistrust prevails, open communication is undermined. In short, there's no engagement with employees.

We've all heard the stories about companies keeping a lid on key developments in an organisation (especially when it can spell bad news): a key executive resigns, a company subsidiary is being sold, or there is an unpopular change in company policy. Company executives hold out for so long on making an announcement that employees start scavenging the corridors for scraps of information. Employees huddle together to make sense of what's going on. They are forced to draw their own conclusions about the reasons for what's going to happen or has happened. Perceptions about the company

withholding information are often more damaging than providing the "negative" news in the first place.

The grapevine flourishes where upper management clings to half-hearted attempts at real communications with employees. I remember working for a large conglomerate where there was a power war between communications and Human Resources who wanted to run the house journal to start their own "vanity publishing". Though their attempted takeover bid failed their continual interference did not help with the release of information that employees would find to be credible.

At another company the grapevine was institutionalized because the reclusive CEO only channeled his rare messages through a rather self-serving staff newsletter. Employees were starved of information.

Then there was the company that announced changes to company policy without prior consultation with employees. When announcements were made some employees were suspicious about the change, others rejected it, and yet others did not understand the change. No face-to-face group meetings were held to explain the change so the grapevine became the educator.

In these situations, hardly favourable to support a winning culture, where information is massaged or ignored reliance on the grapevine grows. This results in lost revenue. Poor internal communication is a real cost to the company with lower morale, reduced productivity, increased stress (reduced well-being), poor internal image (which leads to poor external image), lower quality and poor service.

I need to balance these bad apples with a few examples of where companies have excelled at internal communication. A fishing company ran a road show for all employees on their BEE (black economic empowerment) status to even their most remote and smallest operations so all employees could understand the new development. Another company held a meeting with all employees of a small acquired company to ensure that everyone understood the culture of the company and what was expected. Employees were welcomed in a personal way and made to feel part of the new company. In another instance, a campaign was devised to inform all employees about the need for their company to be divested from a holding company. Question and answer sheets, personal presentations and a proper farewell all helped to reduce the uncertainty and smooth the transition.

In most companies the solution to reducing use of the grapevine rests squarely with top management who need to believe in the importance of open and regular communication. They need to understand and support company wide internal communications. Cross-functional teams involving communications, HR and marketing can help provide a unified approach to internal communication. Communications people also should not be afraid to speak up and talk to executives to let them know what the key issues are and why prompt and open communication is required.

Internal communications is not easy but without mature openness and respect for employees' need to know corridor talk will prevail. Executives need to be equipped to deal with the communication that is required during internal crises - fraud, threats, tragic accidents, hostile takeovers, and strikes. They must know how to communicate "bad" news rather than shy away from it or try to suppress or censor it.

New attitudes are required so that employees are provided with information they need to understand important developments in their company or to carry out their work. Knowledge of the dynamics of interpersonal communication and use of new internal media (intranets, blogs, sms messaging, and video conferencing) can also help towards employees receiving information as direct as possible from executives rather than hearing a distorted version from the grapevine.

ABOUT JOHN BRADFIELD

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