

The Informal Communication Network: Factors Influencing Grapevine Activity

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Although the grapevine is an inevitable part of organizational behavior, we know very little about how managers perceive the characteristics and functioning of this informal communication network. A survey was developed to examine managers' perceptions of the factors associated with grapevine activity. Of particular interest was to determine the extent managers' positions within the organization affects their perceptions of grapevine activity. The results demonstrate that 92.4% of companies surveyed had no policy to deal with the grapevine, and managers and organizations usually didn't take an active role in managing/controlling informal communication networks. The results also indicated that the managers' level of knowledge about grapevine characteristics, causes, and outcomes was affected by their organizational position. Finally, specific conditions are discussed that impact grapevine activity.

The "grapevine"* or "rumor" is the major informal communication medium in an organization. As the name suggests, the grapevine is entwined throughout the organization with branches going in all directions. Rumors are often a rapid form of communication. They spread quickly, uncontrollably and, once started, are often hard to stop. Because rumors can harm both individuals and the organization itself, managers must consider how to control or manage rumor mills.

The purpose of this research is to review literature concerning factors associated with the operation of the grapevine, which is the informal communication network that exists within organizations. As a consequence of the review, a questionnaire was developed to measure managers' perceptions of and ability to monitor and/or control the grapevine. Based on the results of that survey, recommendations will be made as to how managers can more effectively deal with the grapevine.

One additional focus of the present study was to measure to what extent perceptions of grapevine activity were different among levels of management. In other words, did managers' positions within their organizations have an influence on their perceptions of grapevine activity?

*The term *grapevine* is believed to have originated during the Civil War, when telegraph lines were sometimes strung from tree to tree, resembling grapevines. Because of their jerry-rigged nature, these telegraph systems often generated ambiguous and garbled messages. Hence, distorted messages were said to "come from the grapevine."

Review of the Literature

Researchers agree that the grapevine is an inevitable part of organizational life; informal networks are a natural consequence of people interacting.^{1,2} Lending further credibility to the prevalence of the grapevine are studies documenting the extent of grapevine use. One study by De Mare³ identified three levels of communication within organizations: the informal grapevine, the formal organizational communication patterns, and the opinion leader level. De Mare further contended that 70 percent of all organizational communication occurs at the grapevine level. Several other national surveys also found that employees report using the grapevine as a communication source more than any other vehicle.

Other researchers have attempted to identify factors associated with the prevalence of the grapevine. For instance, Allport and Postman⁴ identified two conditions that control the prevalence of the grapevine—importance of the communication subject to the speaker and listener and the ambiguousness of the situation associated with the communication. The grapevine tends to become active when the issues are perceived to be important and the situations are ambiguous.⁵ Additional studies indicate that employees rely on the grapevine when they feel threatened, insecure, are under stress, when there is pending change, and when employees feel that communication from management is limited.⁶

In addition to its prevalence, researchers have also studied the speed and accuracy of the grapevine. Generally speaking, studies indicate that informal networks transmit messages faster than formal ones.⁷ This means that information reaches its destination before formal communication networks begin to communicate with employees. The characteristic of accuracy has also been researched. Studies attest that most information transmitted by the grapevine is accurate. Estimates of accuracy rates range from 75 to 90 percent.^{8,9,10,11,12} Even if the grapevine is accurate as much as 90 percent of the time, it is the 10 percent or more that is inaccurate that can cause organizations problems.

Since we know the grapevine is so prevalent, are there any benefits to be derived? Researchers generally agree that the grapevine often functions in a beneficial manner. The grapevine can help improve organizational efficiency in a number of ways. For example, grapevine information can reduce anxiety and help make sense of limited information. It also can help identify pending problems, can function as an early warning signal for organizational change, and is a vehicle for creating a common organizational culture.¹³ In addition, the grapevine fulfills a social function. Informal communication and socialization can help make work groups develop more cohesion and provide desired opportunities for human contact.^{14,15}

The grapevine can also be used to increase power and promote self advancement. Research indicates that a person's position in an informal communication network is correlated with achievement and demonstration of power.¹⁶ Case studies reveal that employees often use the grapevine in an attempt to outmaneuver others, both inside and outside the organization.¹⁷ Finally, informal communication networks are often an indication of organizational health and morale. Patterns of voluntary turnover have been found to be linked to the amount of informal communication. A greater degree of informal communication is found to be correlated with higher turnover and a high level of grapevine activity is correlated with higher levels of stress, threat, and insecurity.¹⁸

Of particular interest to our research is the extent to which managers are familiar with grapevine activity and attempt to influence the way it operates in their company. Experts agree the grapevine is an inevitable part of the organization. There is general consensus in the literature that management should, however, not try to control or restrict the grapevine.^{19,20}

Experts suggest that since employees are more likely to believe grapevine information than formal communications, any attempt to restrict grapevine activity seems to foster employee beliefs that management cannot be trusted.^{21,22} Authors also point out that because the grapevine serves several useful functions, it would be counterproductive to try and destroy the system.²³ Therefore, while experts state that the grapevine should not be controlled by management, Zaremba²⁴ recommends that organizations adopt a proactive policy toward managing the grapevine in order to decrease many problems, which may result from inaccurate information. Furthermore, a study of 67 managers indicated, that although they are aware of grapevine information, only ten percent of managers stated that they actively tried to control the grapevine.²⁵

Finally, it has been found that management perception of how well it is communicating does not match employees' perceptions. A national survey found that 60 percent of top management respondents indicated that they communicated frequently with their employees, yet only 30 percent of non-management employees agreed. Indeed, 35 percent of non-management employees perceived they were being told very little by management.^{26,27,28} Employees have, therefore, rated the grapevine as more believable and reliable than communication from management.

Based on the review of the literature, four common factors seem to be associated with grapevine operations: (1) the intensity and importance of the communication to the employees; (2) the degree of ambiguity and lack of clarity of the communication to employees; (3) an organizational environment that is insecure or threatening; and (4) an organizational climate where a lack of trust exists among employees toward formal communications. Because experts suggest that managers should take a

proactive approach to managing the grapevine, our research will attempt to ascertain the extent to which managers are aware of (1) the conditions associated with grapevine activity; (2) conditions influencing when grapevine communications become important to employees; and (3) how the organizational climate and environment affect grapevine activity. In order to take a proactive stand, the manager obviously has to be aware of these issues to be effective.

Method

A 53-item questionnaire was developed to assess managers' perceptions of grapevine activity in the following areas: (1) intensity and importance to the employee; (2) ambiguity and lack of clarity to employees; (3) an insecure or threatening environment; and (4) a lack of trust among employees toward formal communications. Each question was in the form of a five-point Likert-type rating scale, which ranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Managers were asked to rate each statement in accordance with the degree to which it reflected their perceptions of grapevine activity.

Questionnaires were mailed to a random sample of 416 public and private organizations with at least 50 employees in the six contiguous counties of Western Michigan (Ottawa, Kent, Muskegon, Calhoun, Berrien, and Kalamazoo). These organizations represented a diversification of economic activities and industrial sectors. The questionnaires were addressed to the Vice President of Human Resources. We received completed questionnaires from 158 organizations, for a response rate of 38 percent. Of particular interest to our study is the fact that the response rate by the managers' position within the organization was as follows: top management 44.3 percent, middle management 22.8 percent, and lower management/supervisors 32.9 percent.

Results

Our analysis will focus on how the managers' positions within their respective organizations influence their perceptions of the conditions associated with grapevine activity. It should first be noted that among our sample of managers, a majority indicated that there was a communication network (the grapevine) in their company that was informal and unsanctioned. Of particular interest to our study was the fact that 92 percent of our lower-level managers perceived an inactive, informal grapevine network operating in their company, whereas only 70 percent of upper level management and 81 percent of middle management perceived this network. In examining the first factor, conditions associated with grapevine activity, the perceptions of our sample of managers agreed with those of managers reported in the literature we reviewed.

Our results indicate that most of our managers indicated grapevine activity tended to increase when employees thought the subject matter was important. Lower level managers seemed to agree more with this trend (92 percent) than their upper management (60 percent) or middle management (69 percent) counterparts. In examining the first factor, our results indicate that managers' positions in the organization (i.e., their level) may affect their perception of grapevine activity. We might speculate that the higher agreement among lower management regarding grapevine activity could be related to their being more exposed to employees—and thus more aware of grapevine activity.

Consistent with our findings above where lower level managers tended to be more aware of the informal grapevine network, these same lower level managers seemed to have greater agreement concerning conditions that affect grapevine activity. For instance, a large majority of lower level managers believed that the lack of formal management communication (88 percent) and a threatening and insecure environment (81 percent) were important conditions associated with grapevine activity. On the other hand, a smaller percentage of upper level management believed that the absence of formal management communication (54 percent) and a threatening and insecure environment (65 percent) were conditions associated with grapevine activity. Similarly, a lower percentage of middle managers also perceived these factors as being associated with grapevine activity (60 percent and 71 percent, respectively).

The second factor we examined attempted to explore conditions likely to influence when grapevine communication was important. Again, consistent with published research, our sample tended to view grapevine communication as being important when formal communications were not clear and were perceived as being ambiguous (top managers 70 percent, middle managers 75 percent, lower managers 95 percent). The majority of our sample believed that grapevine activity increases during times of organizational uncertainty (98 percent agreed) and when employees feel they are under stress (82 percent agreed).

The majority of managers (81 percent) also indicated that a lack of formal management communication tended to increase grapevine usage. However, only about half of our respondents (almost 52 percent) suggested that employees are likely to completely rely on the grapevine when the situations are ambiguous to employees. When there is a problem or when conditions exist that create feelings of insecurity among employees, managers seem to be saying that employees are more likely to be active in their search for information and may be less likely to believe what management tells them. Our sample seemed to say that when formal communications are either lacking or unclear, employees may be more skeptical of management communications.

A threatening and insecure environment also was viewed by our sample as leading to an increase in the importance of grapevine information. Almost 68 percent of our managers indicated that the information communicated through the grapevine tends to express employees' fears and anxieties (top managers 68 percent, middle managers 65 percent, lower managers 70 percent). When the environment is threatening or creates feelings of insecurity, employees increase their search for information. Compared to the perceived ambiguity of formal communications, which seems to affect lower level managers as discussed above, the size of the organization seems to be more important regarding grapevine activity under threatening or insecure conditions. Managers of employees from larger companies, defined as those with over 500 employees, perceive the grapevine as being more active when the environment was insecure or threatening (78 percent) compared to those managers working in smaller organizations with less than 500 employees (62 percent). It could be that smaller organizations tend to be more cohesive and communicate more effectively to minimize fear and anxiety.

The third factor examined was the organizational climate and the impact that a lack of trust toward formal communications have on grapevine activity. A majority of our managers (89 percent) indicated that the grapevine is used to transmit information that is negative and indicative of a lack of trust concerning other employees or organizational policies. Again, the managers' position in the organization seemed to affect their perceptions. Consistent with the above two factors, lower level managers were much more likely to perceive the grapevine as being active under conditions of mistrust or when the information is perceived as being negative (79 percent) compared to middle managers (68 percent) and top managers (59 percent).

In addition to the above three factors examined (i.e., conditions associated with grapevine activity, conditions influencing the importance of grapevine communications, and the effects of the organizational climate/environment on grapevine activity), our research also examined management perceptions of general grapevine characteristics. For instance, we wanted to know if there were particular times during the work day that managers perceived the grapevine as being more active. The majority of managers indicated that grapevine information is usually transmitted during work hours (94 percent), during coffee and lunch breaks (92 percent), before work such as in car pools (48 percent) and after work in informal group settings (59 percent). We found less agreement among managers concerning the speed and accuracy of the grapevine. While most managers recognized that the grapevine existed, there seemed to be differences in opinion regarding its speed and accuracy. For instance, 62 percent of the managers indicated that they believed the grapevine was faster and more flexible than the formal communica-

tion network. An equal percentage felt that while the grapevine contained some truth, it was only partially accurate.

Did our managers perceive the grapevine serving any useful functions? Our results in this area varied. The majority (82 percent) believed the grapevine served a useful function when conditions are ambiguous and employees feel stressed by serving as a mechanism for other employees to express anxiety and release stress. Lower-level managers were much more likely to perceive grapevine activity in this way compared to upper-level managers. Nonetheless, a majority of our managers (81 percent) also indicated that the grapevine can help satisfy employees' desire to know what is going on and can give employees a sense of belonging. In addition, over two-thirds of our managers (68 percent) believed that the grapevine was useful regarding the transmission of information that supplements the formal communication channels. However, this is less likely to be true with upper level managers (62 percent) compared to middle level (69 percent) and lower-level managers (81 percent). Respondents indicated that the grapevine can be used as an early warning system to provide advance knowledge about organizational events. However, less than half of the survey respondents (45 percent) thought the grapevine could serve as an indication of organizational health and morale.

Another area we examined was the extent managers felt they should actively try to influence grapevine operation. The majority of the managers (86 percent) felt that managers should indirectly influence the grapevine by using it as a means to improve the formal communication system. Just over half (69 percent) felt managers should actively monitor the grapevine to identify potential problems and sources of uncertainty and to monitor the communication network for policy acceptance (64 percent). Although the majority of managers (86 percent) felt they should try to influence grapevine activity, lower level managers were much more aggressive. In fact, 40 percent of our lower level managers felt that efforts should be taken to go beyond simply influencing grapevine activity so that management actually tries to control it, whereas only 15 percent of our upper level managers held these views. A majority of managers (86 percent) perceived it to be their responsibility to provide adequate and accurate information and also believed they should take prompt action to correct false information (73 percent). However, when the grapevine is disseminating false information, only 42 percent of our managers felt that the formal communication channels could effectively counter this problem. Again, our lower level managers were more proactive in that a larger percentage (75 percent) felt that they should be responding to conditions that cause the rumor (i.e., false information) rather than the rumor itself, whereas only 35 percent of top management felt this way.

Finally, we asked our managers the extent to which their organizations had formal policies and procedures to respond to grapevine activity.

This is an area where the position of the manager had little influence on perceptions. Approximately 92 percent of our managers indicated that their companies had no formal policy or procedures for dealing with the grapevine. Again, the majority (86 percent) believed their role should be to provide employees with prompt, clear, and accurate information about key issues that affect employees through the formal system of communication. In order to accomplish this, most of our managers (67 percent) believe that organizations should conduct monthly or periodic meetings with all employees and 63.9 percent believed that employees should be surveyed to determine their attitude toward organizational policies and issues. Finally, most managers (63 percent) indicated that organizations should distribute monthly or periodic newsletters to their employees. However, only 14 percent of the managers thought that training programs concerning the nature of the grapevine would be useful to them.

Our results indicate that grapevine activity will increase under four conditions: a) during times of uncertainty, b) when the subject matter is important, c) in an insecure environment where formal communication is poor or lacking, and d) when the subject matter is ambiguous. Further, upper management and larger firms seemed to be more concerned with the consequences of grapevine operation than lower levels and smaller firms who consistently perceived the grapevine to be less active and less important than their counterparts.

The grapevine formula this paper develops is simple and incorporates prior research conducted by Gordon Allport.²⁹ Allport suggested that the intensity of a rumor (R) is determined by the importance of the rumor to the persons communicating (I) and by the ambiguity of the facts associated with the rumor (A); that is:

$$R = I \times A$$

According to Allport, the relation between importance and ambiguity is multiplicative rather than additive for, if either I or A equals zero, then there is no rumor.

Based on our findings we have included two additional factors to Allport's original formula. Thus, the four factors that lead to grapevine activity are 1) the breakdown of formal communication (CB), 2) uncertainty (U), 3) importance of the information (I), and 4) ambiguity (A). This can be illustrated as follows:

$$\text{Rumor/Grapevine} = F(\text{CB} \times \text{U} \times \text{I} \times \text{A})$$

This tells us that the environment and the culture of the organization are also important in influencing the informal network known as rumors or the grapevine.

The implications of including the two additional factors increase the complexity of understanding and monitoring grapevine activity. As pre-

vious literature has indicated, information along the grapevine reaches its destination before that from formal communication channels. When this occurs, information can get twisted and can be misinterpreted by employees in ways that are completely the opposite of what managers intended. This is a problem because employees tend to believe what they have heard in these informal conversations before they believe official communications from management.³⁰ Thus, when formal communications break down or are non-existent, the environment becomes more uncertain and there is greater opportunity for the grapevine and rumor mill to run rampant. Furthermore, in times of high uncertainty, employees try to fill information gaps and clarify confusing situations by interpreting the missing information themselves.³¹ Managers may prefer to ignore this informal network. However, according to Zaremba³² the grapevine can make employees resentful, embarrass managers, distort messages, and make employees militant against effective managerial decision making. In addition, rumors can drain productivity, reduce profits, create stress within the workplace, and waste valuable time.^{33,34}

Since the grapevine cannot be held responsible for communication errors that might occur and because it is somewhat of an unknown, managers sometimes succumb to the wish that it go away. However, we have learned from experience and research that "homicide," or trying to kill it, will not work with the grapevine. It cannot be abolished, rubbed out, hidden under a basket, chopped down, tied up, or stopped. If the organization tries to suppress it in one place it will pop up in another. If one of its sources is cut off, it merely moves to another one. It is as hard to kill as the mythical glass snake that, when struck, broke itself into fragments and grew a new snake out of each piece.^{35,36,37} The grapevine continually moves up, down, horizontally, vertically and diagonally all within a short span of time. It is flexible and can result in positive benefits. It gives people a release mechanism for stress and provides an outlet for expressing anxieties and apprehensions. As an early warning system, it allows people to think through in advance what they would do if the rumor becomes the awful truth. It also helps satisfy a rational desire to know what is really going on and gives employees a sense of belonging. Thus, it is not only impossible but unwise to try to completely eliminate the grapevine.

Summary of Results

In summary, we examined the extent to which managers are aware of the conditions associated with grapevine activity, the conditions influencing when grapevine communications become important to employees, and how the organizational climate and environment affect grapevine activity. What we found was that managers' positions within their organizations affects their perception of grapevine activity. Table 1 summa-

rizes our findings as they relate to managers' perceptions of grapevine activity. The highlights of our findings seem to be that lower level managers are more aware of conditions associated with grapevine activity and are also more likely to be involved with influencing how the grapevine functions. We might speculate that this heightened awareness and assertive attitude is related to the fact that lower level managers are in direct contact with more employees than middle and upper level managers. The extent to which this assertion is accurate could be a subject for future research.

Table I Management Level

	<u>Top</u>	<u>Middle</u>	<u>Lower</u>
Aware that grapevine exists	70%	81%	92%
Conditions associated with increased grapevine activity:			
Important subject	60%	69%	92%
Lack of formal management communication	54%	60%	88%
Threatening/insecure environment	65%	71%	81%
Conditions influencing the importance of grapevine communications:			
Ambiguous/unclear formal communication	70%	75%	95%
Threatening/insecure environment	68%	65%	70%
Affect of organizational climate/environment on grapevine activity:			
Grapevine used for negative information or to indicate mistrust	59%	68%	79%

The general consensus among managers is that negative organizational conditions, such as a lack of trust, seem to encourage more grapevine activity. Here the insight of lower level managers regarding the credibility problems that mistrust can create for management is helpful. It brings to mind the old adage that "actions speak louder than words." Obviously, this isn't news for upper and middle level managers, but our data indicates that these managers should pay more attention to these matters.

The absence of policies and procedures within the organizations surveyed is a reflection of this lack of attention to grapevine activity. On the positive side, however, most of our sample felt organizations should be doing more to keep their employees informed. Again, however, the insights of lower level managers should not be overlooked in that their

general consensus is that the approach should be two sided: it should focus both on negative organizational conditions that create greater use of grapevine activity and formal organizational policies and procedures to deal with it.

Recommendations

As a result of our analysis, several suggestions seem appropriate for practicing managers. Since we agree with the experts who suggest that the grapevine should be influenced by managers but not controlled, these suggestions are intended as proactive strategies so that managers can benefit from the positive consequences inherent in grapevine activity.

- (1) Management should take an active, participatory role in the organizational communication processes by focusing its efforts on influencing conditions associated with grapevine activity. In other words, less attention should be given to the grapevine communication (e.g., the rumor) and more to the conditions that lead to its occurrence. Research indicates that grapevine activity emerges in response to situations that are important to individuals—when there is ambiguity, uncertainty, and lack of formal communication. The work environment often is one that is conducive to grapevine activity because the situation is one that is important to employees and often much secrecy surrounds many organizational decisions (e.g., work assignments, restructuring, relocations, etc.). These characteristics create conditions that encourage the utilization of the grapevine. Therefore, a climate of distrust, the absence of information, unclear or ambiguous messages, and a threatening environment seem to be issues managers can respond to in order to improve organizational communications. Being aware of vague words which may lead to misinterpretation, encouraging two-way communication, and ensuring that the information exchanged is accurate will help to reduce anxiety and the negative consequences of inaccurate grapevine communications (i.e., rumors).
- (2) Respect the employees' need to know and to understand organizational issues. Often, time spent communicating is perceived as a loss in productivity; however, poor communication may also result in lost productivity and efficiency. In addition, there is often a lack of trust by managers to share information. However, managers need to recognize that informed employees are an asset to the organization. Open discussion of decisions and future plans must be encouraged.
- (3) Not only must management keep employees aware of what's going on, but it should actively include employees in communication meetings and in decision making. After years of top-down

management, many companies are now encouraging a more participative management style that empowers employees to express their ideas and suggestions. Empowerment is about giving employees some degree of influence in matters that concern them.³⁸ It has been found to be important to the success of any organizational change program because it fulfills individuals' needs for a sense of control over matters that concern them.³⁹ Managers must be committed to the creation and maintenance of an environment that values teamwork and recognizes employees' perceptions, visions, suggestions, and commitment and reinforces an open, two-way communication system. To effectively develop an empowered work force and an open environment, often the structure, leadership styles and roles, performance appraisals, training, and compensation systems must be reviewed and modified. Organizations must be willing to expend the time and energy necessary to successfully implement a more participative climate.

- (4) Organizational communications must be planned. Managers who fail to adequately prepare themselves before communicating to employees may leave employees confused and frustrated. The organization should have policies and procedures that ensure effective employee communication occurs. These include such activities as conducting timely meetings, using bulletin boards, providing regular performance feedback to employees, communicating and clarifying organizational and individual goals and objectives, and managing dysfunctional conflict.
- (5) Managers should avoid the natural tendency to hide bad news from employees. In the current climate of change, cost-control, and job insecurity, providing no news to employees often seems to be interpreted as bad news. Hiding information or stretching the truth may lead to employee frustration and inaccurate perceptions. Informed employees often adjust to change more readily. Effective managers need to pay more attention to providing employees with both good and bad information; that is the best way to resolve any credibility problem that may exist between managers and employees in the long run.
- (6) Management needs to act promptly to correct false information concerning organizational policies, practices, and general plans for the future. Since our research supports the general consensus that employees will make greater use of the grapevine when they don't know what is going on within their organizations, it would appear this is an area where being proactive, as our sample of lower managers suggest, is sound management practice.

- (7) An organization's communication program should undergo regular evaluations to assess its effectiveness. Continuously monitoring both the formal and informal communications with a focus on quality improvement is essential.
- (8) Finally, since our research suggests that the positions managers hold within their organizations affects their perception of grapevine activity, any program an organization undertakes to influence the grapevine should include input from all levels of management. Like many other aspects of organizational life, the grapevine will continue to exist. In order to make effective use of the grapevine, all managers need to be proactive in monitoring and influencing the conditions existing within their organization that impact grapevine activity.

In conclusion, the informal communication system is the human side of the organization, which is maintained by employees communicating among themselves and sharing information. The grapevine will always exist and organizations cannot operate effectively without it.⁴⁰ While management often views it as a wild and uncontrollable weed, the grapevine actually provides a service to employees by supplying information, particularly in unclear or uncertain situations. In some cases, the grapevine can become a dominant force when formal communication channels are closed. The grapevine can offer a wealth of operating information, and provide important insights with speed and economy that the formal communication network cannot.⁴¹ The informal network can also be effective in generating creative solutions to short-term problems.⁴² However, when too heavily depended on, grapevines can lead to confusion and emotional hysteria. If formal communication is not forthcoming, the grapevine takes over and fills in the informational gaps. Since this system will continue to exist with both its many positive and negative characteristics, astute managers must learn to cultivate, understand, and revamp grapevines in order to help them achieve organizational goals.

Notes

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