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Rumors in the Workplace Affecting Organizational Change Readiness

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Abstract- The spread of Rumors/Grapevines/Rumor-mills continues to be an issue for most mid\large organizations throughout the United States. Rumors have been an integral part of American political views and have had an effect on most organizational change initiatives. The notion of not knowing something provokes human instincts to seek the truth among employees by spreading rumors. In so doing, rumor-mills have the potential to penetrate most organizational structures, which could lead to organizational change derailment if not addressed accordingly.

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Rumors in the Workplace Affecting Organizational Change Readiness

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Abstract- The spread of Rumors/Grapevines/Rumor-mills continues to be an issue for most mid\large organizations throughout the United States. Rumors have been an integral part of American political views and have had an effect on most organizational change initiatives. The notion of not knowing something provokes human instincts to seek the truth among employees by spreading rumors. In so doing, rumor-mills have the potential to penetrate most organizational structures, which could lead to organizational change derailment if not addressed accordingly. Moreover, studies have suggested that most business related rumors are accurate. Most importantly, organizational immunity is not recommended. This can intensify rumors in the workplace. Consequently, this leads to a negative work environment that will ultimately affect work productivity. Although the spread of rumors cannot be completely eliminated, suggestions will be provided to streamline organizational change initiatives that can alleviate rumors in the workplace.

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I. Introduction

A sense of urgency among employees arises when organizational change initiatives are not communicated accordingly. In some cases, organizational change may not have been officially announced, which leads to employees seeking the truth. Most rumors have the potential to creep into most organizational settings. Consequently, if rumors are not addressed by the organization, this lack of action can be seen as validation by the employees, which can drain work productivity leading to profit reductions and ultimately damaging the organization's image.

II. Rumors/Grapevines/Rumor-Mills

It is commonly known that Rumors /Grapevines/ Rumor-mills have had an effect on most mid/large organizational settings throughout the years. According to Moulin (2010), "rumors are performances of border languages or an expression of how the sense of others is revealed for the political endeavors" (p. 350).

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Moulin (2010) further states that rumors are mechanisms used from a humanistic point of view by employees to understand the ambiguous and to make meaning of what is the truth. Unfortunately, American organizations have pushed employees to the outer limits and do not share the most accurate information when it comes to change, which leads to misunderstanding and the surge of organizational rumors that ignites curiosity (Rivero, 2013). Part of the problem occurs when the organization develops a powerful "immune system" similar to immunities developed in the human body. As a result, this immunity of resistance defends the status quo and resists changes that are unrecognizable to mid-management and staff alike (Gilley, Gilley, & Godek, 2009). This could lead to miscommunication among staff thus causing rumors to spread within an organizational setting. At times, organizations do not address rumors in the workplace and dismiss it as a common occurrence. "Rumors do not just fill up time around the water fountain. They can drain productivity, reduce profits, create stress in the workplace (Bordia, DiFonso, & Rosnow, 1994, p. 47).

Unfortunately, rumors in the workplace are prevalent in most organizational settings (Michelson & Mouly, 2002). Additionally, rumors relating to organizational change can actually predict where the organization is heading (Isabella, 1990). Workplace rumors are a symbolic verbal mechanism reflecting the state of the organization's climate. If unaddressed, this could lead to counter productivity among staff members.

III. Workplace Rumors – Causes and Effects

For years, researchers have attempted to have a better understanding of rumors in the workplace and their potential to derail an organization. Knapp (1944) suggests that rumors are shared attitudes, concerns and anxieties, which create mistrust among the organization's shareholders. Additionally, Voas (2002) suggests that false rumors are due to poor communication between management and subord-inates and others who desire to seek the truth about inside information relating to the organizational setting. Voas (2002) further states that, "closed –door meetings spawn more incorrect assumptions than any other reason for rumors. Employees are suspicious of senior

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managers and assume they are only out for themselves" (p. 62).

IV. Management – Choosing to Ignore Workplace Rumors

At times, management may choose to ignore rumors in the workplace, leading to the spreading of rumors. Studies have suggested that rumors prosper when not addressed accordingly (Moulin, 2010). According to Koening (1985), "in a poorly managed organization, they can chip away at morale and fuel anxiety, conflicts and misunderstanding" (p. 55). Most interesting, another study suggests that rumors have the potential to enhance employees' status, filling gaps in social conversation within an organizational setting (Hicks, 1971). Moreover, workplace rumors are systematic and can be spread faster than the organization's formal communication channels. Mishra (1990) further states, "the grapevine is also capable of penetrating even the tightest security because it cuts across organizational lines and deals directly with people in the know" (p. 52). Organizations should not ignore rumors in the workplace that have the potential to harm its brand/image. This being said, organizations need to take responsibility and address rumors in the workplace before the situation becomes out of control.

Organizations have a choice to either address/ignore rumors in the workplace. It is highly recommended that managers address rumors accordingly. It is also recommended that rumor policies and procedures be established alongside a comprehensive ethics training program to address how to report/deal with workplace rumor mills from both perspectives – employer and employees. Moreover, rumors cannot be abolished or hidden away or even stopped. Trying to do so can only lead to the further spreading of rumors leading to negative organizational results (Mishra, 1990).

V. Recommendations – Damage Control Measures

The author of this article proposes the following recommendations for addressing rumors in the workplace.

1. Establish an open dialogue with employees, particularly when organizational change is taking place.
2. Management should address rumors that have the potential to damage the organization's image. It is recommended that management communicates publicly to "clear the air."
3. Management should also act quickly to address rumors in the workplace to avoid the further spreading of rumors in the workplace.
4. Establish workplace rumors procedures and a rumors training program that coincides with the organization's ethics training program or a similar type of training program.
5. Hold "Town Hall" meetings to address organizational change initiatives and the latest information to the general public/employee population.
6. If applicable, attempt to identity and neutralize all relentless people who promote a negative work environment by spreading false rumors in the workplace.
7. Managers should pay attention to patterns or subtle disruption of the organization's climate. This will provide an indication of lurking rumors that have the potential to surface.

VI. Conclusion

Although research has suggested that miscommunication among employers\employees is the root cause of organizational failure leading to the spread of rumors, not enough evidence has been offered cementing this as the main source of the cause. Rumors are similar to bacteria; the longer they linger, the greater potential there is for them to spread. It is highly recommended that managers address rumors in the workplace. Also, establishing workplace policies and procedures/training programs for both employer/employee can be helpful. Most importantly, rumors are unavoidable and cannot be prevented and organizations must be able to address them on a case-by-case basis. Moreover, it is an organizational dilemma that must be addressed to avoid additional workplace related rumor-mill contamination.

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