

APPROPRIATING THE GRAPEVINE COMMUNICATION CHANNEL IN THE ORGANIZATION

Enuoh, R.O. and Inyang, B.J. (Ph.D.)*

*Department of Business Management
University of Calabar, Nigeria*

* Author for correspondence, Phone: +234 8033773403;
Email: benji1955.unical@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract

This paper evaluated the need for managers to understand grapevine activities as contributing to organizational success rather than otherwise. A review of the literature showed that the grapevine cannot be eliminated from any organization and the manager needs to understand, interpret and control the grapevine for the benefit of an organization. The proper management of the grapevine activities serves an effective means of communication that promote the overall health of an organization. Although the grapevine has poor reputation in conducting business and managers attempted to eliminate it in the past, many a manager now recognize it as a valuable asset rather than a liability.

Introduction

Informal listening, speaking and working in groups are just as important as writing formal documents and giving formal oral presentations. A newcomer in an organization will need to listen to others both to find out what he is supposed to do and to learn about the organization's values and culture. Informal chitchat, both about yesterday's game and about what is happening at work, connects him to grapevine, an informal source of company information. Networking with others in office and in town and working with others in workgroups is crucial to success.

According to Mintzberg, as quoted in Locker and Kaczmarc (2004), managers have three basic jobs: to collect and convey information, to make decisions, and to promote interpersonal unity – that is, to make people want to work together to achieve organizational goals. All of their jobs happen through communication. Effective managers are able to use a wide variety of media and strategies to communicate. They know how to interpret comments from informal channels, such as the company grapevine. They can speak effectively in small groups and in formal presentations, and they write well. Information from grapevine could sometimes be useful to the managers because grapevine does not only contain gossips and rumours, but also carries accurate information concerning the organization. The grapevine is a valuable means of communication within an organization, and any attempt to phase it out is unwarranted and unproductive.

The objectives of this paper are, therefore, to review the literature concerning factors associated with the operation of the grapevine as an informal communication network, suggest ways in which managers could utilize it effectively and identify the strategies to curb the negative effects of grapevine activity in the organization.

The paper is divided into five major sections. The first section presents the introduction, while the second part discusses the literature review. The issues of utilization of grapevine activity and curbing its negative impacts in organization are considered in sections three and four respectively. The final section presents the conclusion.

Literature Review

The literature review here is intended to offer a pertinent clarification of the key concepts. These concepts are grapevine, communication channel and informal communication. This will provide the basis for understanding the relevance of the concepts in organizational operations and functioning.

Concept of Grapevine Communication

Grapevine is an informal, person-to-person communication network, which cannot be officially sanctioned by the organization. Grapevine is pervasive in nature and impact to a considerable extent to the formal organizational

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structure. It could be likened to a lizard that visits every man's house. Just as no man will say that lizard had not visited his house before, so shall no organization claim the absence of the informal structure from it. Sims (2002: 155) notes that, "Every organization has its grapevine [and it] is a perfectly natural activity since it fulfills the employees' desires to know the latest information and to socialize with other people."

Davis (1981:337-338) notes the inevitability of the grapevine as a communication channel, when he puts it succinctly thus:

In a sense, the grapevine is a human birthright, because whenever people congregate into groups, the grapevine is sure to develop. It may use smoke, signals, jungle tom-toms, taps in the prison walls, ordinary conversation or some other methods, but it will always be there. Organizations cannot fire the grapevine because they do not hire it. It is simply there. Its inevitability must be recognized in the organization.

Inyang *et al* (2003:132) define grapevine as "an informal, person-to-person communication network which is not officially sanctioned by organization". Lecher (2004) in Webster's dictionary defines grapevine as "unofficial network of communication by which gossip or information are spread". For Crampton *et al* (1998), grapevine is an inevitable part of organizational life, and informal networks are a natural consequence of people interacting. According to Mishra (1990), the grapevine is the informal and unsanctioned network within every organization. In the words of Kreitner and Kinicki (2004:541), "the grapevine represents the unofficial communication system of the informal organization, information travelling along the grapevine supplements official or formal channels of communication".

No matter how the grapevine is defined, one thing is certain, the grapevine is the informal and unsanctioned communication network found within every organization. Just as people are bound to form groups, whether formal or informal, so also are people bound to communicate, whether sanctioned or unsanctioned. Therefore, the ubiquitous nature of the grapevine

activity in organization is not in doubt, and this impacts on organizational operations.

Characteristics and Elements of Grapevine

Grapevine communication is a typical example of informal communication channel. This informal means of communication, in some instances, becomes the most effective and expeditious way of transmitting information. The basic characteristics of the grapevine are that information moves faster, gets rapidly distorted or diluted and does not follow rigid vertical organizational hierarchy. In short, it circumvents the acknowledged conventional channels and travels through the cluster of chain (Level, 1972).

Often, information received from grapevine is referred to as rumour. Information moves faster in the grapevine especially if it is on issue that directly affects employee's welfare, such as wages, payoff, disciplinary measures, promotion and labour, in other words, management issues.

According to Davis (1954:212), the characteristics of the grapevine are:

- a) People talk most when the news is recent;
- b) People talk about things that affect their lives;
- c) People talk about people they know;
- d) People working near each other are likely to be on the same grapevine;
- e) People who contact one another in the chain of procedure tend to be on the same grapevine.

Karathanos and Auriemmo (1999) identify three roles to be filled for grapevine activity to take place:

- *Bridgers or key communicators*: These individuals gather information and pass it on to others. These people are most responsible for the health of the grapevine.
- *Baggers or dead-enders*: These individuals hear rumours, but either do not pass them along or repeat them to other dead-enders.
- *Beaners or isolates*: These organizational members are outside the grapevine and thus not privy to its messages. Therefore, they neither hear nor pass along correspondence.

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Messages transmitted through the grapevine are normally referred to as “rumours”. However, to label a message a rumour is a simplification. There are actually at least four types of messages:

- 1 *Pipe dreams or wish fulfillment:* These rumours identify the wishes and hopes of employees. It naturally follows, then, that these rumours are positive in constitution, yet they still reflect employees’ anxieties.
- 2 *Bogie rumours:* These rumours originate from employees’ fears and concerns and result in a general restlessness within the organization. Often, these rumours are damaging.
- 3 *Wedge-drivers:* These rumours are marked by aggression and animosity. As a result, they are characteristically negative and serve to cleave groups and dissolve allegiances.
- 4 *Home-stretchers:* These rumours are initiated in anticipation of final decisions or announcements. They tend to fill in the gap during times of ambiguity.

James *et al* (1990: 32-33) define rumour as “unofficial and unconfirmed information sent through interpersonal channels”. Rumour is usually bad for people and organization, and it thrives where there is a breakdown in communication. According to them, the sources of grapevine information are traced to:

- 1 *New information:* Here individuals who have access to such information share it with close friends before it is officially released. This sets the grapevine activity in motion.
- 2 *Excitement:* Promotion exercises and new appointments usually cause information to leak before the official announcement.
- 3 *Loyalty:* Friends and colleagues are usually officially informed about decisions affecting them by those who have such information first. This leads to the circulation of grapevine information.
- 4 *Informal conversation:* The work situation creates informal contacts and informal conversation among employees, which leads to the circulation of grapevine information.
- 5 *Insecurity:* When there is tension in an organization, (for example, when there is retrenchment exercise in a public organization), grapevine information will develop.

Inyang *et al* (2003, 13) also note that “when people have personal interest in a situation [or] lack information they tend to be grapevine-active”. People, therefore, try to fill gaps through the informal channel, the grapevine, and this may often lead to distortion and generation of rumours. In a study of two multinational organizations in Lagos, Kester *et al* (2008), found that linguistic and ethnic affinities, and the thematic importance of the subject matter influenced the spread of rumours and grapevine stories in the organizations.

Formal versus Informal Channels of Communication

Every organization has a formal communication system, which provides information regarding the organization to the employees through different media. It involves memos, reports, staff-meetings, departmental meetings, conferences, company newsletters, and official notices. It is highly documented, and as such, has very little chance for change (Inyang *et al*, 2003). However, nearly all of the information within the grapevine is undocumented and is, thereby, opened to change and interpretation as it moves through the network. “The informal organization is less permanent and less stable (than the formal organization) because of the leaders and patterns of actions change readily (Simmons, 1986: 43). This occurs because of dependency of the network on personalities, whereas the formal network is set up through structured policies non-dependent on individuals.

Davis (1954), states that the informal organization is a significant force within the work group, which helps to build teamwork, motivate people, and creates corporate identity. The grapevine is the informal passing of information through the organization. It does not necessarily follow the formal structure of the organization and can bypass individuals without restraint. It can be more direct and faster than the formal channels of information, since the information is not being screened or controlled. It travels faster than formal channels. Interestingly, it has been found that the grapevine is equally active both in management and among the workers.

The grapevine exists in organizations for many reasons. Grapevine communication can carry useful information through the organization with amazing speed. The grapevine is very useful in supplementing formal

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channels. It provides people with an outlet for their imaginations and apprehensions as well. It also helps satisfy a natural desire to know what is really going on and gives employees a sense of belonging. As an early warning system, gossip allows people to think through in advance what they will do if the rumour becomes the awful truth. Subordinates may get an idea of what the boss is wrestling with and may have some suggestions which may help the situation.

The grapevine is flexible and personal, and can spread information faster than the formal communication channels. The grapevine is also capable of penetrating even the lightest security because it cuts across organizational lines and deals directly with people in the know. Bosses who chose not to pay attention to the grapevine have 50% less credible information than those who do. Khandwalla (1977) states that it exists because of excessive structuring of formal work flows and the excessive channeling of information flows. It is fed by personal apprehension, wish fulfillment, retaliation, and gossip. Surprisingly, most researchers have found that most grapevine information is either true or has within it a kernel of truth (Koenig, 1985).

Utilization of Grapevine Activity in the Organization

Proper utilization of informal communication channels can be an effective tool of good administrative practice that management frequently ignores. Coffee-time discussion might be used to relay items of information from management directly to the informal organization. Such contacts pave the way for communication over the official network, thus reducing anxiety and gaining advance acceptance of the official communication. According to Sims (2002: 155):

Every successful organization has at least one healthy, if invisible, channel to conduct the message of its informal organization. This mysterious entity is the real heart of the organization – the means of coordinating people’s energies to solve problems and get things accomplished.

Informal channels can achieve rapid dispersion of information or proposal and can adapt rapidly to a wide variety of communication settings. They tend to minimize problems in the communication process because they avoid many of the limitations found in formal communication channels. There is however, a danger of over utilization of informal lines of communication. Though organizations resent the grapevine because of the rumours that they pedal and the distortion of information, it however reflects the desire of the employees for information.

According to Karathanos and Auriemmo (1999), management can use the grapevine to its advantage by passing information through the grapevine. Employees who have a feeling for importance carry rumors and speculation on the activities of information they carry. Their importance increases with the amount of information about management they carry. These people could be used to the best advantage as management information agents. Such agents should be identified and used as members of the information committee. Managers can also use them as a source for generating feedback and information from employees.

Karathanos and Auriemmo (1999) also note that the contemporary grapevine has kept its reputation for disseminating unreliable information. However, research shows that grapevine information is highly reliable and accurate; making this means of communication an asset to the organization. Studies done by Davis (1969) demonstrated accuracy ratings of nearly 80 per cent for many grapevine transmissions, with a range of accuracy between 75 and 95 per cent. The grapevine's precision is not surprising when one considers the origin of its messages. Rumours which usually pass through the grapevine sometimes begin as testimonies of an actual event. Thus, someone or group has witnessed an event and feels it is worthy of passing on to others in the organization.

Still, people are wary of embracing information gleaned through the grapevine. This is partly due to the grapevine's poor reputation. Grapevine information is also considered inaccurate because its errors are often dramatic. Therefore, the mistakes are more memorable than the grapevine's normal daily accuracy. This skepticism is healthy and contributes to the benefits of the grapevine.

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Probably the best feature of the grapevine is the timeliness of the message it carries. Its speed of transfer is far faster than messages coming through formal channels, partly because formal communication has traditionally been written in the form of memos, reports, and newsletters, which may be time consuming and experience delays.

Since formal communication channels tend to transmit information slowly, gaps between the time information is needed and when it arrives are common. As a result, formal networks tend to be inadequate for handling unplanned communication requirements, for competently transmitting complicated or detailed information, or for sharing personal information.

The grapevine, on the other hand, thrives on quicker word-of-mouth conversations. Although electronic communications have made the formal methods of interaction faster, they have made informal means of conveying information even swifter. Since the grapevine is fast, it can serve as an early warning system for members of an organization.

Knowing this, management sometimes purposely sends messages through the grapevine to test the waters, allowing individuals to plan for and ponder formal statements to come. This may give employees the opportunity to provide input to senior management before final decisions are made. Thus, grapevine's timeliness often gives employees a chance to become more participatory, which is known to enhance an organization's operation. These advantages are particularly beneficial when bad news will be coming through formal communication channels.

Another advantage of the grapevine, according to Karathanos and Auriemmo (1999), is that it can transmit messages in a multi-directional manner. Unlike the formal communication network, which follows a highly rigid, linear path from supervisors to subordinates, the grapevine can leap from department to department and jump between various management levels. It moves up, down, horizontally, vertically, and diagonally in an organization at an incredible pace. Furthermore, the grapevine can serve as an outlet for stress release. Subordinates frequently need an opportunity to let off steam but are unable to do so through formal communication lines, fearing embarrassment or repercussions. The grapevine provides them a way to share their personal opinions and feelings. Another important aspect of grapevine

messages is their personal nature. Instead of impersonal, faceless transmission, via the formal communication networks, the grapevines frequently facilitate enjoyable face-to-face interactions between co-workers.

One other positive aspect of the grapevine is its immunity to time constraint. While the formal communication network typically starts up at 9 a.m. and shuts down at 5 p.m., the grapevine is in effect nearly 24 hours a day. It begins in the morning in car parks, on the way to work and may last late into the night, through company softball teams, golf games, or bowling leagues and clubs.

Finally, the grapevine serves as an index of organizational health, morale, trends, and productivity. The grapevine can spotlight issues and problems important to an organization. Effects of policies and procedures often can be measured with informal communication. Also, it seems that organizations with strong formalized structures that inhibit communication outside these structures may benefit from an active grapevine that supplements formal channels of communication. Indeed, this formal communication network seems to blossom when certain common denominators exist in organizations. If formal channels are rigid and narrow, its vital intelligence is kept from employees. If an overabundance of free time is allowed to subordinates or if employees feel the pressures of job insecurity, be assured that the grapevine will be very active.

Strategies to Curb the Negative Effects of Grapevine Activity

All managers who have attempted to silence grapevine communication have only succeeded in promoting it. The disadvantages can be eliminated if the right information is supplied at all times. Fairness, openness and timely information will reduce distortion and the effect of grapevine.

To ensure that the grapevine remains primarily an asset and minimally a liability, there are some ground rules that management must follow in order to foster an effective, healthy environment for the grapevine to operate. Karathanos and Auriemmo (1999) outline the following guidelines:

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- Accept that the grapevine exists and has the potentials to add value to the organization. Management must not try to eliminate it – they did not hire it and they cannot fire it.
- Acknowledge the fact that the grapevine must, for the most part, remain unrestrained. If management tries to take control of it, they do not allow it to operate effectively and it ceases to provide its potential benefits.
- Do not underestimate the grapevine's power or value to the organization. Ignoring the grapevine can do more harm than good, and managers cannot afford to attempt to escape putting the necessary effort into managing it.
- Become part of the grapevine rather than remaining a passive observer. If the main concern about the grapevine is false information, being privy to grapevine messages will allow management to monitor them most effectively. If management chooses to ignore the grapevine, they fail to use its potentials. In fact, the grapevine can serve as a vital mechanism in the “management by wandering around” (MBWA) approach. MBWA was coined many years ago by Hewlett-Parker of the United States of America as a management system, which requires people to get out of their offices and learn from employees in the organization through face-to-face dialogue. This philosophy suggests that when managers wander around the workplace without any particular objective, they are likely to pick up highly relevant information. This is information that may never have become available if the managers stayed in their offices all day or communicated only in the normally structured manner.
- Maintain activity within formal communication channels. The grapevine is not a substitute for formal communication, but it can be an effective supplementary tool when fostered properly.
- Encourage organizational members to question and assess grapevine exchanges prior to responding to them. This will help keep the grapevine from becoming a facilitator of false rumour.

Inyang *et al* (2003: 14) add that, to manage the grapevine activity, the manager must ensure “that there is open door policy of communication, and that information transmitted reaches everyone in an undistorted form” in the organization. Management actions should not be shrouded in secrecy as this would facilitate the spread of rumours and grapevine activities.

CONCLUSION

Management is responsible for guiding an organization in the accomplishment of its mission. For this mission to be achieved, communication is inevitable. While management gives birth to the formal communication structure, they should also consider the informal channel. The informal communication channel, the grapevine, can be of vital interest to managers. They can use it to their advantage in discharging the managerial functions. It must not be ignored or avoided, as those who attempted same ended up in creating more. The formal and the informal channels can exist together as one to achieve organizational goals. As Hambagda (2000: 62) notes, “the grapevine can be consciously and effectively used as a barometer to evaluate the efficiency of the formal system of communication, and when viewed from this perspective, the grapevine can certainly be a force for good as opposed to evil.”

The grapevine is alive and well. In the past, such a statement would have made management cringe, since the grapevine was often perceived as an impediment to organizational well-being. However, studies already cited have shown that, in verifying the existence of a vibrant grapevine, support the idea that an active grapevine correlates positively with a well-functioning organization. Kester *et al* (2008) found in their study that the informal communication channel – rumours and grapevine activities – significantly influenced management policies toward the accomplishment and attainment of organizational goals. Organizations need a constant, consistent flow of information in order to operate in today’s dynamic environment. Formal channels of communication are often unable to keep up with this informational demand. The informal communication network, the grapevine, picks up the slack and keeps organizations moving forward rather than stagnating.

No medium of communication is perfect, and the grapevine is no exception. It must be managed correctly to yield positive results. However, the cost of this management is well worth the effort when one considers what the grapevine can provide for an organization: the fast, timely, and relevant flow of information from those who have it to those who need it.

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