

Grapevine Communication in Communication Centers: The Needs and Effects

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How does a classic 1968 song by Marvin Gaye relate to the student educators working in today's communication center? Well it might take you by surprise, but this informal communication is the underlying basis for a well-working communication center. Even 50 years later, grapevine communication is still pertinent when it comes to workplace communication. In fact, "research suggests that up to 70% of all organization communication comes through the grapevine" (Goman, 2019, p. 10). The word "grapevine" is defined by Merriam-Webster (n.d.) online dictionary as an "informal person-to-person means of circulating information or gossip," but this definition lacks in explaining the capabilities of grapevine communication. It enhances the knowledge of an organization's specific procedures, furthers the independence of employee actions, and creates bonds between coworkers. All of these reasons are why grapevine communication should be brought to the full attention of all employees so that they can utilize its benefits within their communication centers.

In the broad scheme of workplace communication, it is difficult to spread information solely through formal channels. There are many times that employees may skim past an important note in the weekly memo, an email address might be forgotten in a mass send out, or critical knowledge may seem like common sense to some and therefore does not get passed along to others. This is where grapevine communication, also known as informal communication, comes in handy. It breaks

down those barriers of miscommunication so that workplace environments can function properly and efficiently, especially when it comes to the learning curve of new employees.

As in-depth as training may be, there is always crucial information that can slip through the cracks and knowledge that can only be gained when in the thick of a situation. Grapevine communication passes on information regarding an organization's specific procedures and experiences where formal communication might come up short. For example, at the UNCG Communication Center, there is a listed procedure that consultants should follow before filing away completed consultation paperwork. It is taped right above the box where it goes once done. However, the instructions lack certain elements that are necessary for interlink, or international student, consultation paperwork. It may seem like a small detail, but when done improperly, it can cause a real hassle later on for documenting consultations. Luckily, through the help of my fellow consultants, they showed me the right way to do it, and now I can pass along the information to anyone who might find themselves in the same position in the future. This is a common example of how informal communication travels through workplaces such as communication centers.

Grapevine communication has many benefits, but what happens when the wrong information gets transferred? Most work environments don't have a set protocol for these situations. In fact, a research study showed "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" (Crampton, Hodge, & Mishra, 1998, p. 1). It is an understandable concern to think that false information can get out of hand, but Carol Goman explains that "80% of organizational rumor proves to be true" (2019, p. 11). The marginal difference shows that it is worthwhile to put credit towards informal communication. In my own experiences, corrections can be implemented very quickly even towards a problem that has been going on for years. This reveals how communication passed through the grapevine is not only beneficial but also mostly accurate and helps to further the success and competence of employees.

In the modern-day communication center, it is evident that enterprise and team cohesion are becoming more common, leading to the need for initiative and communication amongst personnel. Therefore, it is impossible for management to keep a constant dialogue open with their subordinates through formal communication standards alone. Grapevine communication is necessary in providing straightforward channels so that employees can work independently while simultaneously staying connected with their colleagues on projects. Brown and Starkey (1994) found that, in many companies, "the holdings board communicated little information to its subsidiaries which in turn tended to disclose little information down the management hierarchy, while communication from senior executives to the shopfloor was practically non-existent" (p. 820). This quotation shows that connection between employees of different pecking order can be absent within a company. As a result, the communication most certainly is also. If employees of lower rank are meant to respond to situations at

work only when their higher ups directly inform them to, it would be extremely cumbersome and overall detrimental to both the employees and the company. Nothing would get done. Grapevine communication provides essential information which then allows for personnel to take initiative on projects and work effectively together. For the UNCG Communication Center, this is commonly seen when one employee is leaving for the day and has a project that needs to be completed. The employee will pass it along to another one coming in. They will explain everything that is needed for it, both employees build trust in this interaction, and both are able to proceed knowing that the project is in good hands.

When coworkers can communicate effectively with informal communication it instills comradery and an affinity towards those around them. Galpin (1995) explains that "two-way communication can enhance interpersonal effectiveness . . . when people share information and understand each other, their interpersonal relationships tend to be better" (p. 6). Being able to tolerate those that you work with can create a huge difference in work ethic and productivity.

Companies should want their employees to be able to think for themselves and act on their best judgment from the information they receive. Even in times when direct orders from the higher ups trickle down to the lower levels, subordinates might be able to brainstorm better ways to get the job done. Individuals at a company are then able to rely on one another because they can build a relationship and repertoire with each other which promotes trust and accountability. To do this though they need informal connections with their fellow coworkers and grapevine communication allows for that. Communication centers are largely built around the efforts of student and faculty collaborations, both of which are extremely

busy and cannot dedicate their time solely to the center. By building trust, accountability, and worker independence through informal communication, it allows for the center to flourish even with the constant change over of employees and limited availability of faculty.

This essay has shown that informal channels of communication, such as the grapevine, should be addressed by managers within communication centers and brought to the attention of all its employees. Grapevine communication allows for employees to become proficient in areas of their work by using information that can only be shared by those with previous experience. Grapevine communication helps individuals to complete tasks unassisted by management, which furthers independence and productivity. Finally, it enhances the partnership and relational experience of coworkers. In short, grapevine communication comes as naturally to the modern-day workplace as the need to sing along to a catchy song.

References

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