Human Resource Management International Digest

Rumors in organizational communication: a nightmare for HR managers
Subin Sudhir,

Article information:

For Authors

If you would like to write for this, or any other Emerald publication, then please use our Emerald for Authors service information about how to choose which publication to write for and submission guidelines are available for all. Please visit www.emeraldinsight.com/authors for more information.

About Emerald www.emeraldinsight.com

Emerald is a global publisher linking research and practice to the benefit of society. The company manages a portfolio of more than 290 journals and over 2,350 books and book series volumes, as well as providing an extensive range of online products and additional customer resources and services.

Emerald is both COUNTER 4 and TRANSFER compliant. The organization is a partner of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and also works with Portico and the LOCKSS initiative for digital archive preservation.

*Related content and download information correct at time of download.

Viewpoint

Rumors in organizational communication: a nightmare for HR managers

Subin Sudhir

E mployees often engage in informal interpersonal communication within organizations. Such communication is essential for creating a better work environment. While there are documented advantages of such communication, often, such communication is plagued by rumors. DiFonzo and Bordia (2007), define a rumor as "an unverified and instrumentally relevant information statement in circulation that arise in contexts of ambiguity, danger, or potential threat and that function to help people make sense and manage risk". Such rumors have been established to be a common outcome in an uncertain situation where there is a lack of available information. This paper will highlight the menace posed by rumors, the motivations for employees to engage in rumormongering, and possible ways to manage the spread of these rumors.

Subin Sudhir is Assistant Professor at the Indian Institute of Management Indore, Indore, India.

Challenges with rumors within organizations

It is understood that any form of unverified information can possibly cause challenges to the HR manager. Here, are a list of possible challenges faced by HR managers while encountering such rumors:

- *Collective sensemaking*: Rumors are known to be a source of collective sensemaking among employees in uncertain situations. Such sensemaking can often be detrimental to the management's objectives of handling certain situations, especially in organizational change contexts.

- *Mistrust and panic*: It is documented that rumors often cause mistrust and anxieties among employees. Rumors associating with downsizing, acquisitions, job-security, etc. often create an environment of mistrust. Such situations often lead to fear, uncertainty, panic, and overall drop in employee motivations.

- *Propagating group biases*: Rumors often arise in contexts justifying group biases and group cultures. It has been established in literature that often, these rumors accentuate the biases and sub-cultures of a group of employees. These rumors create situations of discomfort for other groups, as well as create a menace to the central organizational theme, and they strengthen some shared beliefs within the company.

- *Organizational citizenship behavior*: Organizational citizenship behavior is a voluntary citizenship behavior expressed by employees toward the company. Often, rumors in circulation devour such citizenship behavior as rumors directly influence the employee's trust on the organization.

- *Fantasy and dreams*: It has been documented that many rumors are a consequence of people's fantasies and dreams. Often, in highly uncertain, ambiguous, or anxious situations, people fantasize of situations that they believe to be true. Such beliefs are

propagated as rumors, which become major problem areas for HR managers who have to deal with these stories.

All of the aforementioned issues are consequences of rumor propagation within organizations, which the HR managers have to tackle. Most rumors in organizations are relatively harmless and die a natural death in some time, but some are potentially harmful. Rumors that arise and propagate in contexts of organizational change, ambiguous environmental situations, or in times of crises are the most significant as they possess the lethal ability to create great harm to the organization. It is in such contexts that the HR team should be equipped to manage such miscommunications.

Why employees share rumors

Many documented studies (Sudhir and Unnithan, 2014) have established the motivations for employees to engage in rumor propagation. These motivations can be summarized into four major themes as listed below:

1. *Anxiety/uncertainty management*: Employees share a rumor as a mechanism to manage their anxiety and to have a better control over the situation. Often, negative rumors are shared in uncertain and ambiguous organizational situations, wherein sharing these rumors helps manage uncertainties. Employees share these rumors among one another to manage their collective anxieties.

2. *Information sharing*: It is suggested that in situations where there is no formal explanation, employees share rumors to make sense of the situation and to share valued information that could be of use to colleagues. Rumors act as a readymade explanation; they help others in need of this information and in many cases are perceived as facts while being shared for the informative value.

3. *Relationship management*: Often, rumors act as good conversational topics. The newness, entertainment value, and intrigue element of such rumors is a good source of conversation. Employees share rumors for their relationship goals, of having better workplace relationships. Such rumor sharing will focus on the effects on long-term relationship, social acceptance, need or reputation, and rumor as a conversation starter.

4. *Self-enhancement*: The self-enhancement goal refers to the need to feel good about one-self. Rumor sharing is viewed as a method to enhance self-esteem or self-confidence, to boost one's social identity, to spread propaganda, and to consciously spread a rumor. Employees often share rumors to enhance their own self-esteem or to be part of a group. This sharing of rumor is often the most common within organizations, as employees try to showcase their ability to have access to restricted information by sharing these rumors.

Employees might be motivated to share rumors for varying motivations for different situations within the organization. There could also be situations when employees share rumors for more than one reason as stated above.

How to manage rumor circulation?

Having discussed the problems and motivations for employees to share rumors, it is pertinent to discuss the possible strategies that HR managers could adopt to manage these rumors:

1. *Investing in a rumor hotline*: It is important to note that HR managers need to be first aware of rumors in circulation to manage these. It is important for organizations to have an internal mechanism to observe such rumors in everyday circulation. Quite

frequently, the rumor in question has spread widely before the HR manager has a chance to manage it. It is a common practice for civic bodies to set up rumor hotlines in times of crises for citizens to share rumors in circulation, to clarify authenticity of such information, and to identify fact from fiction. Organizations must invest in creating a rumor hotline, similar to the whistle-blowing hotline, for employees to share and verify rumors under informal circulation within the company.

2. *Rumor denial*: Denial is the strategy wherein the HR manager can negate the rumors without providing any additional information about the situation. This strategy has limited effectiveness with regard to managing rumors, as often, denial accentuates fears by adding more clout to the rumor.

3. *Rumor rebuttal*: One of the most frequently used strategies in rumor management is rumor rebuttal. Here, the HR manager can try to dispel the rumor by providing strong justification against the rumor's authenticity. There are many possible mechanisms of rebuttal, including rebuttal against the source, rebuttal against the message, or rebuttal against the context:

   ■ *Rebuttal against the source*: HR managers can dispel the rumor by establishing the ineffectiveness or even the negative bias carried by the source. For example, if the rumor source is a disgruntled employee, the HR manager must clarify that the rumor is a malicious attempt of the said employee to tarnish the morale of other employees.

   ■ *Rebuttal against the message*: In situations where the rumor is based on factually incorrect premise or on malicious circumstances, the HR manager should try to provide authentic information to quell the rumor. Such rebuttal can help in reducing the belief in the rumor, reduce further spread, and manage any unaddressed anxiety.

   ■ *Rebuttal against the context*: Many rumors arise in fallacious contexts that define a possible future incident likely to happen. An example is a context of a future takeover by a competitor and a corresponding rumor about possible mass layoffs. Such rumors need to be dispelled by providing evidence on the contrary by senior management to pacify unnerving employees.

4. *Bolstering*: Bolstering is a common crisis management strategy, wherein the HR manager can highlight a positive aspect of the organization without specifically addressing the rumor. This strategy is an indirect communication strategy that aims to generate greater positive associations with the firm and, at the same time, does not inadvertently propagate the rumor alongside rumor management.

5. *Acceptance and apology*: In certain situations where the rumor is true, organizations must adhere to an honest communication strategy. The HR manager must accept the rumor, and in situations where the rumor is negative or potentially harmful to the employees, an apology must be given. The HR manager can also communicate measures to reduce the possible impact of the event.

6. *Legal remedies*: Many rumors are malicious and are propagated by employees who are vengeful against the organization. In such situations, the HR manager must try to avail legal remedies to manage these rumors and to ensure such behavior does not reoccur.

Conclusion

Rumor propagation in organizations is an extremely dynamic process. The key element in rumor management is the swiftness and agility in intervention and management of rumors

by using strategies described earlier. HR managers must try to continuously monitor conversations on social media platforms and use the rumor hotline to identify potentially harmful conversations, to evaluate their possible impact and have targeted strategies to tackle the menace. Surviving one rumor does not make the firm immune to future rumors, and HR managers must learn from each rumor episode to evolve a better rumor identification and management system.

References

DiFonzo, N. and Bordia, P. (2007), *Rumor Psychology: Social and Organizational Approaches*, American Psychological Association, Washington, DC.

Sudhir, S. and Unnithan, A.B. (2014), "Measuring consumer motivations to share rumors: scale development", *International Journal of Online Marketing (IJOM)*, Vol. 4 No. 3, pp. 51-67.