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### When the rumour strikes...

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XTRA WORKPLACE

# WHEN THE RUMOUR STRIKES ...

Managers should make use of the underground rumour mill to understand employee concerns

DR MANOJ THULASIDAS

EMPLOYEES seek insights into where their organisation is heading. And they should, because what their organisation does has a direct impact on their well-being.

If your organisation is planning to retrench 50 per cent of its staff, for instance, you had better start looking for a new job right away.

Who do you turn to when you need information? Your management most probably wants you to go to them. From the employee's perspective, this may not be the smartest move. But fret not, there is an alternative.

Parallel to the world of corporate memos and communication meetings, an underground "rumour" city trades information, often generating it as needed.

Employees flock to the rumour mills, not out of their inherent malevolence for their employers, but because of a well-founded and mutual mistrust.

Management tends to be cautious (and therefore less than candid) with their announcements, while more than 80 per cent of office rumours turn out to be accurate, as some studies show.

Let's take a hypothetical situation. Suppose five years ago, your chief executive officer took to the podium and declared that there would be absolutely no retrenchments.

How many of you would have believed it? Probably only a handful. And when the inevitable retrenchment did happen, this group of believers would certainly wish they had listened to the grapevine instead.



This credibility gap that a typical management team suffers from can be addressed only through open and candid communication. Therein lies the rub.

The management cannot always be as candid as they would like to be. And, they certainly cannot afford to be as candid as the employees would like them to be.

Lack of candour in an atmosphere of uncertainty breeds rumours.

Rumours, as defined in psychology, are hypotheses with widespread impact. They abound when the management refuses to trust employees with strategic information. This lack of trust and information leaves them with no choice but to interpret the developments themselves. In such interpretations lie the origins of office rumours.

Rumours are not to be confused with gossip. While rumours are based on conjecture and are presented as future, corporate-wide eventualities, gossip can

be idle or with malicious intent directed at individuals. And it is usually presented as fact. In highly-competitive settings, gossip can inflict irreparable damage on unsuspecting victims.

Once a rumour attains a high level of credibility, the top brass will be forced to talk. But the talk has to be candid and serious as well as timely.

If they wait for too long, their attempts at a *tete-a-tete* would resemble

feeble attempts at damage control.

And if the talk is a mere torrent of cliches and rhetoric, it will be taken as an effort to gloss over potentially-catastrophic changes. Such weak communication fuels more rumour than it quells.

Given that critical job-related information usually flows down the grapevine, the employees are going to talk.

The only sure-fire strategy for any management is to make use of the underground rumour mill – the classic "if you can't beat them, join them" paradigm.

If you are a part of the top brass, here is what you can do.

Circulate as much accurate and timely information as you possibly can. If you cannot do it through formal channels, try informal ones, such as lunches. This way, you can turn the rumour mills to serve your purpose rather than let them run amok.

Do not underestimate the power of the grapevine, lest all your corporate communication efforts should come to nought.

*The writer is a scientist from the European Organisation for Nuclear Research (Cern), who works at Standard Chartered Bank in Singapore. His internationally-acclaimed book, The Unreal Universe, is available in local bookstores and at [www.TheUnrealUniverse.com](http://www.TheUnrealUniverse.com).*



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