

# Communicate at the Speed of Gossip



BY GREG SCHINKEL

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“*Two of the three top employee motivators are satisfied by gossiping.*”

Have you ever noticed that word gets around on the grapevine faster than you can communicate it through normal channels? It's also safe to say that the grapevine isn't always the most effective communication method given how distorted the message gets as it passes from person to person.

### Calculating the Speed of Gossip

A client did an experiment. In their food processing plant of 300 employees they measured the time it took for a rumour to spread from the front office to the shipping dock. It took only 20 minutes. It helped that the rumour was juicy and titillating.

The managers in the operation were left wondering why it took weeks, months or years to spread their official messages throughout the organization.

### Why People Gossip

Two of the top three employee motivators are satisfied by gossiping. The first motivator is the need for employees to feel in on things. Because managers and supervisors tend to communicate less frequently than they should, employees are left to fill in the void with gossip and rumour. They crave being in on things so much that they will take even the smallest bit of information and spread it quickly.

The second motivator is the need for recognition. Employees get personal recognition from their peers by sharing information their co-workers didn't know. The message gets distorted and exaggerated from person to person because each individual wants the recognition that comes with telling the story better than they heard it. Sensationalizing the message makes the employee appear more in the know and makes other people want to listen. Gossip also creates teamwork in a strange way as the employees work together to

communicate.

When leaders satisfy the need of employees to feel in on things and get recognition, they starve the desire to gossip. This can be especially true of poor performers, who because of being ignored by their manager, are more likely to use gossip to fit into the team.

### How Leaders Can Communicate at the Speed of Gossip

1. **Communicate More Frequently and Completely:** Recognize that employees, in their desire to feel part of a team, want to know what's going on so be sure to provide regular messaging. Many front line leaders use a stand-up shift start meeting to provide information and set expectations for the day ahead. A monthly or quarterly town hall meeting is likely not frequent enough. Equip supervisors and lead hands to communicate daily about key information.
2. **Recognize Desired Behaviours:** Part of gossip is the recognition that people crave by passing along exaggerated stories. Provide regular (constant) recognition so that employees know they don't need to tell tall tales to get attention.
3. **Build Stronger Relationships:** People gossip less about people they care about. If the grapevine is over active, look at whether you are building silos and fostering individualism by playing favourites. Make it a point to connect with team members regularly and personally. They will appreciate the attention and find it harder to talk negatively about the leader or their teammates.

Excessive gossip is an indicator of poor communication and possibly ineffective leadership. Take action to increase the effectiveness of your front line leaders and their managers with training, coaching or mentoring.

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