



Stopping the Telephone Game in Your Organization

Description

Most of us have heard of the game called “telephone.” Here is how it works: People line up in a single-file line. The first person in the line has a message whispered in their ear. This person then whispers the message they heard to the next person. This continues until the message has reached the last person in line, who then shares out loud what they heard. It is not unusual for this final message to be different from the original message. It might closely resemble the original message, or it might be very different.

Why is this? The more layers there are in communication, the more likely a message can become distorted. This is true for large items as well as day-to-day actions. Circumstances inside a company can function much like the telephone exercise. Also, at times, a statement can be interpreted one way if one person says it and another way if a different person says it.

Here is an example. A senior executive who was looking at the cost of an item made the comment that it was expensive. To the senior executive, this was an observation. It didn’t mean that the item should not have been purchased or that a cheaper product should have been chosen. It was an innocent statement. Yet the senior executive’s comment led to the person leaving the area and saying to a coworker, “The boss is upset.” Within a few hours, the message had become, “The boss is really angry about the purchase.”

So, the statement that an item was expensive ended up as a rumor that the boss was mad. A situation like this might lead to someone in the company saying, “We can’t buy that item again.” It could cause someone to feel they made a mistake.

My hope is that the first person’s misinterpretation about the boss being mad was unintentional. Unfortunately, there are some people who get their energy from passing along information to others. A common term is “gossip.”

In my role, I hear many things in working with organizations. I heard the story that I just shared. I saw the boss and said to him, “I hear you’re mad.” He gave me a quizzical look. I shared that I heard he was upset due to the cost of the item mentioned above. The response was, “I am not mad; I just said that it was expensive.”

There are lots of lessons here. For those in leadership roles, it's important to know that what is said carries lots of weight and can be interpreted in a different way than expected. The larger the role, the larger the magnifying glass. Leaders need to hold up the mirror and ask: *Is what I am saying something that could be interpreted differently from how I want it to be?* They also need to be very quick to stop the rumor mill and coach people on how unhealthy it is.

What about the person who left the conversation about the item being expensive and told others that the boss was mad? In a case like this, don't let it slide. What gets permitted gets promoted. The senior leader may want to meet with the person. If this is not a usual occurrence, they may want to discuss how the comment became a rumor about the boss being mad. The senior leader can own the fact that they need to be careful with the context they use so it is not interpreted another way. The discussion also needs to take place that leaving the office and saying the boss is mad is not the right thing to do. We never want to not own up to mistakes; however, in this case, the employee caused something that should not have happened.

Even with the best communication, there are people who thrive on gossip, being in the know, and/or positioning people in a less-than-positive manner. For this reason, it makes sense for leaders to micromanage communication.

In a health system, a person involved in facilities often knew early on what was being discussed. The discussion could be around departments moving, the timing of renovations, new construction that would occur, and so forth. This person held a very important position in the organization. It seems after each meeting he felt the need to go to a variety of managers to let them know what was coming. He quickly became a person in the know. He would even caution managers not to say anything for the information was confidential. (Please realize this behavior is an exception to the norm.)

The CEO realized that this style of communication was not healthy. He wanted communication, but in a more consistent manner so people did not feel left out. He met with the head of facilities and explained that this behavior could not continue and why. Then, after every meeting, the topic of communication was discussed, and a procedure was decided upon. If there is a vacuum in communication, it will be filled—and usually filled in not the best way.

In summary:

1. If you are in a leadership role, be very aware that what you say carries extra weight. A simple statement can quickly become an organizational rumor, from "The boss is mad" to "This person is in trouble." Hold up the mirror and make sure you're paying attention to what you say and how it might be interpreted by others.
2. If someone starts a rumor, address it. Counsel them that this is not the behavior expected of them. Most organizations have standards of behavior that address gossip or miscommunication. Remind people that these standards are to be upheld.
3. Be aware there are some individuals who get attention from what my Cousin Al says is juice from being in the know. To help prevent this behavior, micromanage communication. For example, after meetings, it is a good idea to decide how communication will be handled.

Mark Twain's quote "A lie can travel half way around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes" may not fit the above examples perfectly. However, if you replace "lie" with "gossip," it is close enough.

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