

Using the Grapevine

Are You Creating Vinegar or Sparkling Wine?

By Shawn Kent Hayashi

What happens to a bottle of wine when you leave it uncorked for too long? It turns to vinegar and no longer tastes good. If you are using your grapevine without a strategy, reason, or forethought you may be creating corporate vinegar.

Using the grapevine

Sharing kudos, acknowledging others accomplishments, highlighting communications of interest to you that you read in the company newsletter, and sharing your goals are examples of what works. Having a conversation with a business friend about your desire to be promoted into a new position is a great use of the grapevine. Your business friend may be able to give you suggestions on how to position yourself for the job. Your business friend may also be able to link you with those from her network whom can help you create a promotion.

If you are using grapevine chat to make fun of others, to undermine projects, to leak confidential information, or to sabotage a peer, you may be headed for the vinegar distillery. One of my clients recently told me about how much trouble she got into because she wrote in an email message some negative comments about the boss. She thought she was using the grapevine to vent. The vent almost blew her out of her job. Her business friend accidentally forwarded the email on to others. Do not use your internal network to complain, gripe or back stab. Talk to personal friends, family, or colleagues you know from outside your organization about your troubles when you need to vent. Back handed gossip is an unwise use of the grapevine and usually ends up putting you into troubled waters.

What happens if you aren't aware of the grapevine? You lose an opportunity to influence others and you send a signal that you aren't interested in the organization. People who say, "politics are toxic; I just want to come do my job and go home" are politically immature raisins who dry up on the grapevine. More realistically, nearly every person employed talks to somebody at work. Why not plan to promote your interest and the company?

Be willing and prepared to make small talk with folks in the cafeteria, in the hall and at the company picnic. Safe small talk topics include the weather, local sports, entertainers, movies, and anything that is current in the company, "Say, have you met our new VP of Operations yet?"

Managing Business Friends

Once someone becomes a business friend do not mistake the relationship for a personal friendship. Personal friends may talk about their opinions on politics, religion, starting a new business, and deeply emotional issues; business friends typically do not discuss these topics. When people work together they will defend their job or the company if they are at risk, not you. I've seen one too many people, myself included, mistake business friendships for personal ones; the results are usually painful.

Business friends share best practices, tips on how to work best with Betty in accounting, and insights into what is happening in the industry and market place. Friends help each other problem solve; they do not jump into the problem to stir the pot. Yes, over time business friends may become personal friends, the signal that this has happened is that you vacation together, eat at each other's homes regularly, and both have stated that you would definitely continue the relationship if the other person moved to another company, division or location. Nevertheless, remember, if you work in the same company, the business comes first. That is why you need connections in and out of your business.

Evaluating Your Network

When was the last time you assessed your network? A network is all the people you know, those you like and don't like - it's your own piece of the grapevine. It's anyone you talk to. Having an internal network is just as important as building a career network outside your organization. A group of peers, colleagues, and corporate supporters is a vital resource in career development today. If you are not actively networking now, you may want to create a networking map to become more aware of your existing network.

How do you do this? My favorite way, and one I teach participants in my workshops on networking, requires post-it notes, markers and a blank wall. Put your name on one post-it note. Put that in the middle of the wall. Write the names of your closest friends, family, and peers on separate post it notes. Place the post-its close to your name to represent how much influence these people have on you. Then identify everyone you know using individual post its. Your dry cleaner's name may be very far away from yours.

Think of the people you know from all the areas of your life: work, social, family, community, church, associations and so forth. You may want to color coordinate the categories so it will be easy to see the big picture. Give this activity a few days. You'll be amazed how many people you know. The average network consists of 2,500 people.

After you have the names hanging on the wall you need to stand back and evaluate your network. I recommend having a minimum of twelve people with whom you can share your business and personal goals, three people who you can call on in a crisis, five people who know your industry and can discuss what the trends are, and three personal friends with whom you can share your secrets.

When I did this activity the first time I saw clearly where I needed to build more relationships and needed to change some current relationships. I took action to intentionally find the people who were missing from my network. I learned how to identify ways to share what I wanted, my goals, and my interests with others. I make a point to ask questions to demonstrate my interest in other's goals, interests, and hot button issues. By doing this I have cut time it would have taken me to locate information, found new highly recommended vendors, connected people who needed to know each other, and significantly increased both my productivity and my effectiveness.

Give it a chance. "I heard it through the grapevine" may be the best tune to sing while you watch your productivity soar and your career network grow. Cheers.

© Shawn Kent, 2007

Reprints available upon request, (215) 588-1188.