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# 10 Tips on Managing Rumors and Resistance to Workplace Change

by Diane Coles Levine — *October 2017*

“The spread of Rumors/Grapevines/Rumor-mills continues to be an issue for most midsize and large organizations. The notion of not knowing something provokes human instincts to seek the truth among employees by spreading rumors. In so doing, rumor-mills have the potential to penetrate most organizational structures, which could lead to organizational change derailment if not addressed accordingly. A sense of urgency among employees arises when organizational change initiatives are not communicated accordingly. In some cases, organizational change may not have been officially announced, which leads to employees seeking the truth.

“At times, management may choose to ignore rumors in the workplace, leading to the spreading of even more rumors. Consequently, if rumors are not addressed by the organization, this lack of action can be seen as validation by the employees, which can drain work productivity leading to profit reductions and ultimately damaging the organization’s image. **Rumors are similar to bacteria; the longer they linger, the greater potential there is for them to spread.**” [1]

Therefore, it is highly recommended that facility managers take the lead to address rumors and resistance to change when embarking on a workplace transformation and/or a move.

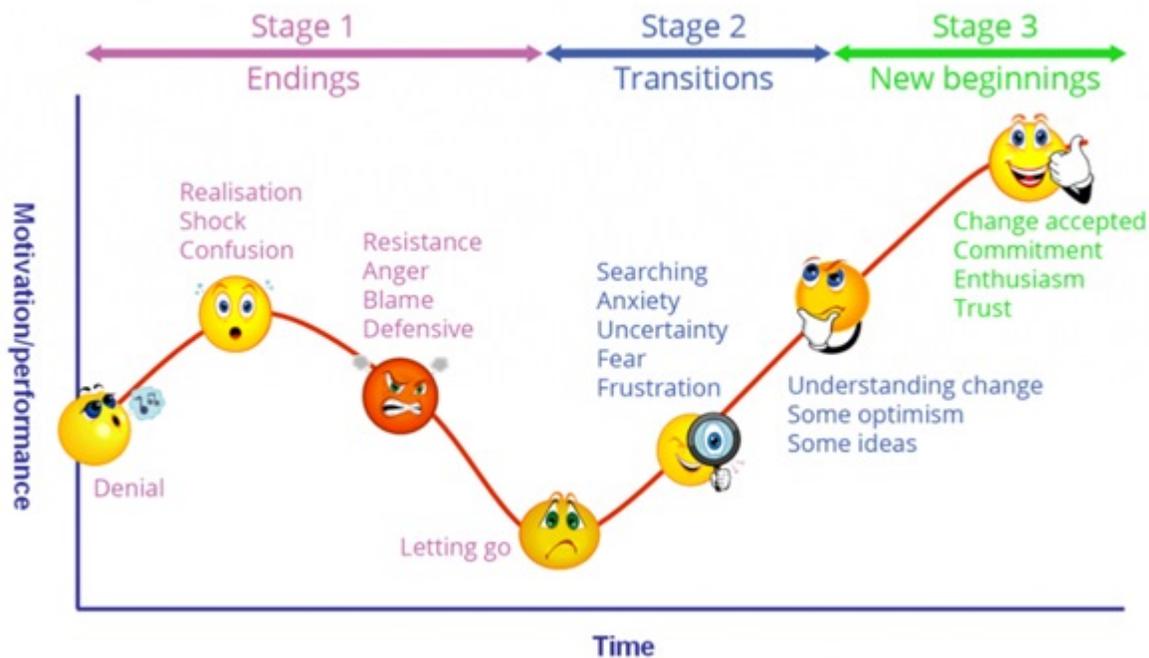
Here are 10 tips for managing rumors and resistance to a workspace transformation:

## 1. Have a solid change management program

People have a natural resistance to change and even though there are good business reasons for transforming the workplace, often, workers feel vulnerable with the process. A change management program helps employees get back to work quickly and effectively and in return reduces rumors, stress, costs and consequently minimizes productivity loss. Workplace change management should be executed very carefully and thoughtfully by a change management professional.

## 2. Communicate early

The earlier you communicate the news, the better. Don't let your employees find out they are moving from a hard-walled office to a cubicle a few weeks before the move. They need time to adjust. As shown in *Figure 1: The Change Curve*, it takes time for employees to go from first learning about a change to acceptance.



*Figure 1: The Change Curve*

## 3. Explain the reasons for the change

There are many drivers for workplace change like economic conditions, regulatory changes, mergers and acquisitions, reorganization, expansion, growth, technology advances, employee attraction and retention, lease expiration, or countless other causes. Whatever the reasons are, they should be carefully developed and explained to employees over and over again until employees start repeating it to each other.

## 4. Create consistent messaging

One way to manage rumors is by using a process called "message management," a public relations methodology. Message management is used to control and create a consistent story to avoid having employees receive contradictory or confusing information that will cause rumors to spread and shed doubt on your project. This method also helps create appropriate

communication for different audiences. The public relations member on the change management team can educate the group about this process.

## 5. Be honest

Be up front with employees. It's best not to hold back any information even if it is negative. If your workplace improvement project is running late, tell the employees and explain why. If a group's mobility plans have been delayed, let them know as soon as possible. Employees will trust you and the process when you share information whether good or bad.

## 6. Listen

Listen to employee concerns and address them all along the way in your change management program. Discuss employee concerns with the change management team and incorporate them into your communications materials.

## 7. Address employee concerns

Provide an avenue for employees to express their opinions and concerns. This can be done through employee surveys, meetings, focus groups, open forums and other communications avenues mentioned in tip number 9.

## 8. Include resistors on your team

Appoint and empower a committee of change agents who advocate for their departments and for upcoming workplace changes. These change agents act as a link, selling the change, helping to dispel rumors and bringing insights and observations back to the change management and project team. Appointing resistors and supporters as change advocates (*Figure 2: Supporters and Resistors to Change*) will aid in testing the merits of the change approach. This can be difficult in the beginning but will pay off in the long run as resistors become highly influential advocates.



Figure 2: Supporters and Resistors to Change

## 9. Engage employees in the change

Another approach is to engage employees in the change through activities, events and communications avenues like weekly frequently asked questions (FAQs). This will generate excitement about the change and help prepare employees especially when including pictures of the space, furniture, new technology demos, and video clips. FAQs will make employees feel part of the process.

## 10. Monitor progress

Conducting and reviewing employee surveys and focus groups will help to understand your audience and better manage any rumors or resistance. There are pre/change and post/change survey tools available to monitor employee engagement including the Gallup Employee Engagement Survey, the Leesman Index and others that will help you gain an understanding of employees' concerns. The more you know, the better you can manage any rumors and resistance. Conducting a post review will determine whether objectives were met and lessons learned can be incorporated into future projects.

## Summary

Any Facility Manager knows that when embarking on a workplace transformation project or move, gossip about that project will happen almost immediately. Workplace rumors are systematic and can spread faster than the organization's formal communication channels. Organizations should not ignore gossip and rumors in their workspace projects that could cause potential to harm their brand, image, reputation and productivity.

***“If a company has 200 employees and each employee spent one hour a day trading gossip, that would result in \$160,000 of lost productivity each month. That’s a loss of \$1.92 million a year (based on \$40 p/hr, salary & benefits).”***<sup>[2]</sup>

Facilities managers should take the lead in helping senior executives understand the need to follow these tips to uncover controversial “hot button” issues and, in turn, save costs, protect the brand and increase employee productivity.

[1] Rivero, Orlando. “Rumors in the Workplace Affecting Organizational Change Readiness.” *Global Journal of Management and Business Research Administration and Management*; Volume 13, Issue 12, Version 1.0, 2013.

[2] Celeste, Janice. “5 Steps to Stop Gossip in the Workplace and Increase Productivity.” *Huffington Post: The Blog*. 09/08/2015 09:41 pm ET **Updated** Sep 08, 2016.

**Diane Coles Levine** is the President of Workplace Management Solutions. She serves on the IFMA Board of Directors, is Past Chair of the IFMA Foundation and was named the. She is an international speaker and guest lecturer at Vienna University of Technology and MIT Professional Education Programs. Diane is co-editor and author of the international award winning books *Work on the Move and Work on the Move 2*.



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