



To Leak or Not to Leak? ©

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A wise person once warned, “those who gossip with you also gossip about you.” That’s something to think about the next time you’re tempted to share office gossip. And to those seeking to float trial balloons, please deflate them!



When leading a communications workshop, I was once asked about the efficacy of leaking. Not to the news media, but rather using a workplace’s “grapevine” to surreptitiously circulate information to employees about upcoming initiatives that may be controversial, like reorganizations, promotions, staff departures, new initiatives or budget cuts.

Several workshop attendees said they thought using the grapevine was a good idea. I didn’t.

Let’s leave aside the human cruelty involved in leaks involving staff: If everyone’s saying that Jane and Sam are going to be let go, imagine how Jane and Sam will feel when they hear the gossip, as they almost certainly will.

Publicly traded companies can’t selectively leak non-public information to the news media, family members or favored investors. That’s a violation of securities laws. No one at the workshop worked for a publicly traded company, but I thought I would get that out of the way just to be sure.

Selective leaking is standard operating procedure for people working in politics. Elected officials of all ranks and political parties float trial balloons every day to try to capture the headlines and ensure the story reflects their views.

Strategic leaking is part of what's called "winning the news cycle" or "shaping the narrative." In D.C., people with power use leaks to advance their agenda (or their client's agenda), or torpedo an initiative from a rival. Almost any news story that relies on unidentified sources originates as a carefully calculated leak.



It works for the D.C. power brokers, but it won't work for you, because there has to be a control mechanism. Beltway insiders have it, but utility communicators don't. It's called "access."

When I was a reporter in Washington, D.C., I saw this happen. Sometimes I was on the receiving end of carefully leaked information, such as possible candidates for regulatory offices. Here's how that happens: leakers call journalists, establish the ground rules of the leak (attributed, off the record, background or deep background), leak the info, and then tell the reporter if they get it wrong, their calls will never, ever be returned.

Journalists live and die by their sources. Losing access to the White House press room, or having your press credentials pulled by the congressional press office, is a fast ticket to a career in another field.

As a utility communicator, you don't have the opportunity to enforce threats with those to whom you leak. Are you going to write someone up for leaking inaccurately?

Releasing info to the grapevine is a real-life version of the party game “Telephone.” You remember that one, right? People line up and the first person whispers something to the next person, and it goes down the line until the last person hears the whispered phrase. By the time the secret goes from the first person to the last, what started out as “white cat” probably ended up as “dirty rat,” or “door mat” or “silver hat,” or “Willy's fat,” or worse.



Is that really the way you want to share information about the new customer information system, a new product launch, the new CEO, impending reorganization or soon-to-be job losses? Of course not. You'll have to spend a ton of time walking back all the wild, and occasionally goofy, rumors that you yourself started. Does that sound like a productive use of time and oxygen?

Until you become the director of communications for a powerful elected official, I advise you to do all your communications in a transparent and above-board manner. Though it may be fashionable to think people who play by the rules are suckers, I continue to believe that open and honest communications is the right way to operate. Because all of us have to look in the mirror each day. What kind of person do you want looking back at you?

