

Nothing Positive Grows in the Dark

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During the summer, after a busy spring it is not unusual for a company to make changes. Once the busy season passes, it is not only an opportunity for the company to make changes but also a time when people choose to leave the company. The key to these changes being proactive and positive will be the way the company handles communications. After all, nothing positive grows in the dark.

Whether the change is major or minor, someone in your company will at least perceive that something is happening. Your choice is now to either defend against rumors and perceptions or make sure that the information delivered carries your message. The following is the story of an actual company and unfortunately not so different from others.

Brad has been a key performer in the office of a multi-office company and really more than that, a person who others looked to as a sort of a barometer of the company. Even when things were in flux or less than wonderful, Brad could be counted on for a smile and a “let’s go get them” attitude. The day that Brad chose to leave the company, even though he was going to a different position that really represented growth in his career, the company chose to go on as if nothing had happened. No positive announcement, congratulations or other positive approach. Rumors in the company began to fly. Questions were raised but unanswered leaving the only answer to be a validation of rumors.

It would have been one thing if the rumor and guessing had been limited to inside the company but as all good rumors do, this one was quickly seized by the competition. Brad being the social creature that he is and a nice guy - knew everyone. Even though he tried to make sure that anything he said was positive, the perception both inside and out of the company was “If Brad left, something must be really wrong.” People inside the company began looking for faults - no one and nothing was exempt. More than that, these same people began to look outward with the thought fueled by rumors that if something was this wrong, perhaps they should consider leaving as well.

Competitors who first heard the story from Brad and had congratulated him on his new position, now had reason to question whether or not other rumors they were hearing could possibly be real as they were starting to see some of the other people from Brad’s former company looking for new positions. How could they not take advantage of the opportunity to pick up some of the people that were considering leaving?

This same company decided to make other changes in the roles and responsibilities of key management players. These changes had been needed for a long time and really had the potential of being positive business decisions. However, the company did not seize the opportunity to make this a company-wide announcement. Instead they kept on promising themselves and those that knew of the changes that an announcement would be made but that they still had some things to work out.

Weeks passed and it was nearly a month, coincidentally the timing of Brad’s leaving came during the period of silence. Over this period, subtle changes had occurred, in some cases, it became

necessary for some of the managers who knew about the changes to share at least part with their offices to diffuse rumors. In spite of begging and pleading, still no communication from company leadership.

Brad's leaving in this time of non-communications worked silently, fueling the rumors. Now the rumors were everything from that the company was being sold to that it was going bankrupt. Talk among many even now on the management level included speculation and a watch for any symbol that something was amiss. Now any change that the company made was thought to be a part of what a company does trying to save itself from the throes of death rather than the positive business moves they actually were. Even an announcement at this point would not be judged on the information provided but rather in light of the perceived situation.

Another player who had always been positive and innovative left the company. The decision to leave came because there were no answers to questions. They were in a compromised position with the teams that they led for the company. The leaving enhanced doubt in the company that it would or could now do what was necessary.

Leaving became the choice compared with being a part of the problem. In a week, two more of the stronger people in the company announced resignations, all to go to better positions. This only fueled the fires of speculation. The rumor mill began to churn faster. As several of the people leaving told the leadership that they really needed to become proactive in giving information, the leadership started listening and not only putting out press releases but messages internally. Now it appeared that they were trying to stop the flow but at this point, nothing had the value intended. It was a small Band-Aid on a gash.

If the company had only been proactive in the beginning with solid communications, even incremental if necessary, they would not have been put in the position they now were in, appearing desperate when people came to turn in a resignation.

Not only did competitors catch the scent but so did the clients and customers. Business opportunities that should have been theirs without question now began to consider them against competitors. In some cases; the questions from the clients and customers were very direct. The agents did not have good answers and even questioned the answers they gave feeling like they were not sure of the truth.

Soon the company found that it had lost a lot of its better performers and a lot of those who were on a path growing into good performers. Now that staff was down, they had to begin closing offices and making changes to adjust the cost picture. Rather than this being seen as a business decision, it now made it look like the rumors were true.

Trying to salvage value, the company was forced to sell as it had gone past the point of recovery and would have been forced to nearly a start up position. None of the events should have been the Achilles heel. The series of rumors, conjecture and subsequent events could have been prevented through proactive communications. Communications were dark, nothing could grow.