

## Bad Manners, Rumors, and Your Career

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

One of the risks you face as you progress in your career is *rumors*. People may make up various falsehoods and share incorrect (usually negative) information about you. These falsehoods can spread like wild fire and can literally destroy your career overnight. It is even more dangerous when there is an element of truth to these rumors and you do not speak out against them.

Rumors can be created by your competitors, by someone who does not like you, or simply by a colleague for seemingly no reason at all. Regardless of the source of information, once a rumor is created, it can damage you a great deal. In my career, I have heard numerous rumors about bosses having affairs with colleagues (most of these were true), about people stealing from employers (some of these were true), and about various other improprieties that people may have been involved in. Whether it is your integrity or your chastity, the odds are very strong that at some point a false rumor will circulate about you on the job or among your colleagues.

One of the most incredible rumors I ever heard was when I was going to high school in Bangkok, Thailand, in the mid-1980s. One of the most attractive girls in our school was an American girl whose father was a Green Beret in the Army. He had been a highly decorated war hero and was a real-life sort of Rambo. From what I understand, he was even consulted when they were making said movie, because he had actually traversed and blown up villages and so forth single-handedly during the Vietnam War. After the war, the man lived in Laos, Cambodia, and other areas with his family, where he apparently carried out all sorts of covert missions. One day, the man was flying his family in an army helicopter and it was shot down over some hostile territory. The daughter was around 10 or 11 at the time from what I remember. The mother was killed in the accident and the daughter broke her leg. For several weeks the father carried her through hostile territory, killed several attackers, and eventually made it to safety. After this occurred, the story became legendary throughout the region, having been well publicized by various media outlets. I first heard about it during my first few days of school.

The father had raised his daughter to have an unwavering sense of discipline, and she was a black belt in karate by the time she was 14. Although the girl was not Asian, she was fluent in Vietnamese and Thai and also French. I am sure you can imagine that, given the experience she had had, she was quite hardened as well. This young woman was highly intelligent. She sat in class in a militaristic sort of way, absorbing everything, and she always got the best grades. She never spoke in class.

One time another girl in our school called her a "whore," and to the astonishment of the other students who were present the young black belt jumped a few feet in the air and kicked several of the girl's teeth in. I did not witness the incident but I can still remember the face of the girl whose face had been kicked in, because she was missing several teeth, and never had them replaced.

Everyone was pretty much afraid of the American girl before she had kicked in the girl's face, but after that people were terrified. No one ever spoke to the girl, and neither she nor they seemed to care. Some 16- and even 18-year-old boys were way too immature for this girl--even though she was only 15. She was beautiful, but so disciplined, intelligent, and hardened that there was no way people could really relate to her. I heard later that this young woman eventually attended Harvard College, as her father had done. The girl, like her father, was an example of a kind of militaristic perfection that I have never seen before or since. She had no friends that I knew of, and all men kept their distance.

A few months after the incident where she knocked out the front teeth of the girl, a rumor started circulating in the school that the reason the girl had kicked in the other girl's face was that she had in fact been seen working in a brothel in Bangkok, as a prostitute. And apparently brothels were something with which many students were familiar at this particular international school.

Within a few short weeks, everyone in the school was under the impression that the American girl was a prostitute who worked in a brothel whenever she was not at school. None of this was true; however, the rumor persisted because the girl always kept to herself. The friends of the girl who had been beaten up always seemed to be delighted by this rumor and were sure to keep it in circulation, at any given opportunity.

In this case, someone who had formerly been viewed as *above* everyone else in the school, suddenly became *beneath* them, all based on this rumor. By the time the rumor had circulated enough, the girl could not have become friends with the popular girls in the school, even if she had wanted to. She could not have dated eligible boys in the school, even if she had wanted to.

I am 100% sure that this rumor had zero truth to it, because I know the girl spent her time after school doing karate training. An acquaintance of mine in the school trained at the same kick-boxing gym as this girl, and she was there for several hours each day after school. However, because no one knew the girl and she kept so much distance, the rumor about her ended up getting repeated over and over again, until it became the truth as far as anyone was concerned. Nobody was there to defend the girl, and she herself did not make any effort to deny the charges against her.

This is an example of how propaganda can be used against someone. Propaganda is one of the most significant and dangerous things you will ever confront in your career. It is something you need to guard against, and also something that you can often prevent just by being more known by those around you. If people do not have any information about you at work, they will simply invent it. *If there is no information available about some person, place, or thing, others will always invent it. This is human nature.*

My grandfather was a newspaper reporter; however, during World War II he worked for the U.S. government in the Middle East as an intelligence officer, writing *false propaganda*, which was meant to create problems for the enemy. Typically, he

created various leaflets and so forth that were dropped out of planes into enemy territory. My grandfather was so good at this that he ended up becoming a one-star general--a significant achievement for someone with no military background, who was just a newspaper reporter. This shows the tremendous power of words on the battlefield and also in life. Words are like weapons that can harm just as swiftly and effectively as bullets and tanks.

When you understand words and their massive power to influence the minds and actions of others, you can understand why a writer with no military experience could be made a general. Propaganda and its effective use can undermine countries, groups, and people with ease. It can turn people against an enemy, it can make detractors support an enemy, and it can turn people against their own leaders. Propaganda is amongst the most effective and harmful tools available in warfare, business, and personal relations.

The book *Psychological Warfare* relates the following pamphlet distributed in World War II:

#### **Guard Against Venereal Diseases**

Lately there has been a great increase in the number of venereal diseases among our officers and men owing to prolific contacts with Filipino women of dubious character.

Due to hard times and stricken conditions brought about by the Japanese occupation of the islands, Filipino women are willing to offer themselves for a small amount of foodstuff. It is advisable in such cases to take full protective measures by use of condoms, protective medicines, etc.; better still to hold intercourse only with wives, virgins, or women of respective [sic] character.

Furthermore, in view of the increase in pro-American leanings, many Filipino women are more than willing to offer themselves to American soldiers, and due to the fact that Filipinos have no knowledge of hygiene, disease carriers are rampant and due care must be taken.

This particular pamphlet appears to be an anti-VD pamphlet that was given to American troops. However, in actuality the *Japanese gave this pamphlet to the Filipinos*. The Japanese were trying to get the Filipinos to believe that the Americans were saying bad things about them, with hopes that the Filipinos would cooperate less with the Americans.

It is not only high-level officials, countries, or international celebrities that fall victim to the ramifications of libel, slander, and propaganda; negative rumors and falsehoods can infect anyone at any social level, and they can affect you in your career.

There are three types of propaganda that are typically used to lessen the reputation of others:

- First, there is *black propaganda*, which appears to come from a source other than the one it really does. The VD pamphlet example above is an example of black propaganda, because it emanated from the Japanese, not the Americans.
- Second, there is *gray propaganda*, which does not identify its source. During many wars leaflets have been distributed, which show generals living in great comfort while their soldiers live under horrible conditions. This false information from an unknown source can easily create divisions between leaders and their followers.
- Third, there is *white propaganda*, which comes from an acknowledged source. For example, in World War II, when British men were away fighting the war, the British ran many campaigns seeking to recruit women and others who had never worked before to work in factories and so forth, to help support the war effort.

Many rumors and falsehoods can become prevalent in society, despite not being true. There is a great willingness of people to believe various untruths, regardless of their source.

In your career, one of the best ways to protect against false rumors is to always make yourself known and to be outspoken. Many organizations *clam up* and remain silent whenever any negative information about them is made public; however, clamming up will not make this problem go away. The only way to make sure that the truth is known about you is to speak up and make the truth known. The people who end up getting hurt are those who keep secrets and keep to themselves. The less that people know about you, the more propaganda and rumors can hurt you.

Perhaps you are like many others who are introverts and are not comfortable getting out there and sharing information about themselves with others. If this is the case, I must tell you that in your profession the worst thing you can do is to keep information about yourself from your coworkers, bosses, and others. In the long run there is a real risk in being mysterious and unknown. People should know your story. The more they know your story and your position, the less likely it is that rumors and falsehoods will circulate about you. You should always keep the channels of communication clear and open with the people around you.

If you are confronted with a false rumor about yourself, the best thing you can do is to prove it untrue. This will generally stop the rumor right away:

*"I am a prostitute? How is this possible? I have been going to karate six hours a day after school for the past three years. I also do this on the weekends. Why don't you come down to the gym where I practice and train every day and talk to my coach and every other person there about this?"*

*[pullquote]I am a prostitute? How is this possible? I have been going to karate six hours a day after school for the past three years. I also do this on the weekends. Why don't you come down to the gym where I practice and train every day and talk to my coach and every other person there about this?[/pullquote]*

A statement like this might have stopped the rumor instantly. If the girl and her karate routine had been known by the other students in the school, such a rumor would never have lasted, since nobody would have believed it. The young woman's main downfall was that she isolated herself from the group; since none of the students had much of a sense of this girl's character, she was generally perceived as being stuck-up, rude, and having poor social graces. Nobody could stand up and say otherwise about her.

In every society, those with bad manners or who lack social graces are ostracized from the group and are often considered *bad people*. In Thailand, for example, it is rude to touch someone on top of the head because this is considered a *holy* part of the body. It is also rude to put your feet up, pointing them toward others, because the feet are the lowest part of the body. If you were to go into a Thai person's home, take your shoes off, cross your legs, and point a bare foot at your host, you would probably not be welcome back. In all cultures, we dislike and exclude rude people, and we give the benefit of doubt to those whom we know to be courteous and to have good manners. This is because good manners show that someone considers the other person important. People will never be open to your ideas or want to defend you if they perceive you as having bad manners. Arrogance drives people away and therefore does not make them befriend you or want to defend you. Instead, this type of behavior invites problems and often gives cause for people to create rumors: it is called *spite*.

Few people realize that subordinates in any organization will always relate to superiors how the people they deal with behave. For example, if you are rude to a secretary, he will almost always tell his boss, and this will lessen the boss's opinion of you. The secretary is talking to her boss each day, every day. The delivery person is stopping by the office to chat with the CEO. When you are interacting with various people, you may have no idea how many people they can influence, or how important they are. In most cases, the least important people have a far greater need to feel respected than the people at the top.

Here are some examples of how people often exhibit bad manners and rudeness:

- Being late for meetings
- Interrupting people
- Failing to say thank you
- Ignoring people
- Failing to stand up when someone enters the room
- Not shaking hands when meeting people

When you are rude to people, you predispose them to disliking you. If someone decides to dislike you, the person will enthusiastically grab on to any rumor about you and will be very quick to spread it. Spreading a bad rumor about you will make the person feel good. Whenever you have invalidated someone in some way, he or she will, in turn, feel validated upon hearing something negative about you. By the same token, if you have shown courtesy and have made people feel valuable and important, they will not want to spread negative information about you, and they might even go to great lengths to stop the spreading of such information.

Be known and understood by your peers. Shine in your ability to be courteous and appreciative of what others have to offer. Do not be arrogant. If you can remember these simple things, you will lessen the chances of facing negative rumors while you are on your path to success.

### **THE LESSON**

Rumors are extremely dangerous. Competitors and colleagues alike share incorrect, negative information about you, these rumors can spread like wildfire and quickly shipwreck your career. Make sure that your peers know and understand you, show courtesy and respect for others, and avoid all types of arrogance; if you can do these things, you can mitigate the likelihood and potential damage of rumors.

---

<https://www.harrisonbarnes.com/>