Rumours on the Fourth Floor (B2 · English B2)

Tekst / Transcript

The email arrived at half past four on a Tuesday and said almost nothing. All staff were invited to a meeting on Thursday morning; no agenda was attached. Within ten minutes, the fourth floor had stopped working altogether. In an office of ninety people, this kind of silence never lasts, and by five o'clock the corridors were full of low, urgent voices.

Rosa watched it all from her desk by the window with a kind of grim amusement. She had been at the company for eleven years and had seen three reorganisations, two takeovers and one very dramatic resignation. She knew that the uncertainty was worse than almost any piece of news could be. People can handle bad information; what they cannot handle is a blank space where information should be.

By Wednesday morning the speculation had become quite creative. One team was convinced that the building was being sold. Another had decided that the whole marketing department would be moved to Lisbon. Someone in finance claimed to have seen two men in expensive coats touring the third floor with a clipboard, and this detail was repeated so often that it acquired the weight of evidence. Rosa's own manager, normally a sensible man, began to speculate about early retirement packages over coffee.

"You realise we're inventing all of this," Rosa said to him. He shrugged and said that inventing something was more comfortable than waiting. She could not entirely disagree. Still, she noticed how quickly the invented stories hardened into facts, and how a potentially harmless rumour could ruin someone's week. Two of the younger designers had already started updating their portfolios.

What frustrated Rosa most was the effect on real work. A potential client had been promised a proposal by Friday, and nobody was writing it. Deadlines were quietly abandoned. When people believe that everything is about to change, they stop investing effort in the present, and the damage from that is often greater than the damage from the change itself.

Thursday came. The chief executive stood at the front of a crowded room, apologised for the mysterious email, and announced that the company had won a large public contract and would be hiring forty new staff. There was a long pause, then laughter, then applause. Rosa noticed that several colleagues looked almost disappointed, as though they had prepared themselves for a disaster and now had nowhere to put the feeling.

Afterwards, walking back upstairs, she thought about how inevitably this pattern was in every organisation she had known. Send an unexplained message to nervous people, and fear will fill the gap. Perhaps some anxiety is simply inevitable whenever the future is genuinely unknown. But she promised herself one small thing: when she eventually ran a team of her own, she would always write the agenda in the email.

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