

WARNING! HOW TO DISCUSS YOUR PERSONAL LIFE AT WORK WITHOUT GETTING INTO TROUBLE OR LOOKING BAD



Summary: Ever wondered how to discuss your personal life at work without getting into trouble or looking bad? Here are some actual examples and guidance from professionals on the subject.

A few years ago, Karen Wilson faced a professional dilemma. Unable to conceive, she and her husband decided to either undergo infertility treatments or adopt a child. She needed to curtail her business travel. What, if anything, should she tell her boss – and how should she tell him?

Wilson ultimately decided to tell her boss everything, but also offered suggestions on how she could stay with the company without traveling as often. Her approach worked well. "My boss looked at me," Wilson recalls, "and said, 'What do I have to do to keep you here?'"

The decision Wilson had to make is probably familiar to anyone who has spent any time in the workplace. When there is trouble at home, be it an issue of health or personal finance or any other matter, employees have to decide whether to share the intimate details at work, who to trust, and when to start talking.

The Basic Rule (And When To Break It)

The wall between work and personal life should be as difficult to penetrate as the proverbial wall between church and state in American democracy. But the constitutional principle of freedom of religion does not guarantee freedom from religion – and there are exceptions to the rule about divulging personal information at work. With so many employers offering "family friendly" benefits, it may even pay to talk about some personal issues at work.

Some of the benefits (mental-health coverage, for example) can be accessed anonymously. Others, such as reimbursement for adoption expenses, require workers to notify someone in the company if they qualify. The federal government even offers worksite parent support groups through the Office of Personnel Management.

Nancy Jackson, a media affairs specialist, says that sometimes "it's not only in the best interest of the company [to know about employees' personal life], but also in your interest to let the company know." In cases of depression, for instance. More than 30 percent of employers recently reported having to deal with an employee's depression at some point. No wonder, then, that many HR departments have been trained in that realm and are aware of the needs of employees to have flexibility when depression hits.

Wilson goes further: Sharing personal information also is a great way to develop trust. "Every time you have a transaction or interaction with people," she says, there "is an opportunity to build the relationship up or destroy trust." Workers can lose a real opportunity to connect by being too close-mouthed. "They just say, 'I have a personal issue' or 'I need some flexibility,'" she says, "and they're not really honest about what's going on."

The Case for Tight Lips

Yet career experts and HR professionals still warn against loose lips at work. "The less personal information known about you," says career coach Stephanie Van Bouten, "the less possibility there is of it being used against you."

Asked when workers should get personal on the job, HR Consultant Nancy Wong answers abruptly. "When [the problem at home] is going to affect your work," she says. "When you're not going to get something accomplished. When you can't be there."

That admonition extends to health issues. The Americans With Disabilities Act and other laws seek to protect the professional interests of people who have recurring or debilitating diseases – but there are legitimate concerns about people being unfairly punished because of health problems. In a tutorial about health disclosure posted to its website, the National Multiple Sclerosis Society hints at the danger of being too open about health issues at work. "If your MS has not created any limitations for you," the tutorial advises, "you may decide to say nothing. But if you feel disclosure will not be used against you, and that telling your boss and your co-workers provides more relief and is better for you than remaining silent, then you should tell."

Some experts (and working mothers) even warn against breaking the news that you are pregnant before your colleagues really need to be "in the know." The bottom line: Hide your pregnancy as long as your body will let you.

Financial problems are an equally touchy subject. Van Bouten, for one, says it may not be wise to tell your employer if you have to file for bankruptcy. That could keep you from getting a promotion down the line. If, on the other hand, your financial and family life is in such tatters that your paycheck is about to be docked for child-support payments, it might be better if the company hears it from you rather than law enforcement.

Getting Personal at Work

If you do decide to talk about your personal life at work, be careful who you tell and how you tell them. In most cases, determining the "who" is easy: Only tell your supervisor – and ask for confidentiality. Perhaps those few people whose jobs will be directly affected by your disclosure should be told. Do not confide in colleagues before your chat with your supervisor, even to those you consider friends. The boss inevitably will hear the rumor, and the version he or she hears through the grapevine may not be too flattering.

In fact, if the boss hears about your personal problem from someone else, it can reflect poorly on you. "It shows a complete lack of loyalty to your boss," Wilson says.

It is equally important to approach your supervisor with ideas on how you can be of value to the company despite any personal problems. If illness prevents you from being in the office every day, Wilson suggests making yourself available by telephone or offering to work on a computer from bed. "When you reveal personal information," Wilson asks rhetorically, "is it to be part of the solution or to dump the problem?"

There will be times when your personal life intrudes on your career. And when that time comes, Jackson offers this advice: "It's not only in the best interest of the company [to know pertinent personal information] but also in your interest to let the company know. By communicating firsthand, you really eliminate problems down the road for all parties involved."