



Loose Lips Sink Ships



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So proclaimed signs during the Second World War when confidentiality of information was paramount. 1945 was a long time ago, so such an important lesson has been easy to lose during this relatively lengthy peacetime period. However, the lesson is just as important now as it ever has been, but on the reduced scale of your company vs. the enemy (your competitors).

The point of not sharing what seems to be innocent company information is because even idle chatter can end up with a catastrophic result due to two factors: (a) you never know who is listening and (b) you cannot know how your tiny morsel of information completes the jigsaw for someone else. Let us illustrate with some examples.

A client of mine in Ottawa told me that, only a week ago, while riding a bus, she heard two strangers speaking across the aisle. She was not paying attention, until much to her surprise, her name came up as they chatted about a specific business matter in which she was involved (with another company, not with CCCC). Greatly irritated, she called the company and cancelled her order with them.

A few years ago, I was alone, enjoying an after-hours cocktail in Place Ville Marie in Montreal, surrounded, as usual in another city, by strangers. Typically, we humans do not listen to other conversations unless they say something relevant to us; then our brain has a way of quickly focusing on the data. In this case the neighboring conversation shifted to financial software, the specialty of my business at the time. My ears perked up. Then the speaker mentioned the name of a client of mine because of a contract he said he had 'in the bag'. This time my brain perked up. What I learned was that a project was out for public tender, an opportunity that I and my company, up to that moment, were quite unaware of. I connected with my team in Ottawa to check it out, which they did. We bid on the contract and won it. That idle chatter cost that fellow a lucrative 'in the bag' contract.

To emphasize the point (a) above that you never know who is listening or watching, again in Montreal, checking into a little restaurant for dinner, I sat in the corner absorbed in my papers and a fine glass of wine. I noticed a beautiful lady at a nearby table, holding hands and whispering sweet nothings to her partner (his back to me), she giving him the occasional loving kiss. When the gentleman got up to head for the wash room, much to my surprise, it was a chap from my block in Ottawa, whom I knew quite well to be happily married with 3 little kids at home. I slunk down in my chair, retreating as much as I could to disappear from his view. He never noticed me, fortunately. A similar scenario happened another time, but in the Miami airport when a chap I knew well, also a director on a Board

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with me, strolled gaily down the concourse holding hands with this charming lady who was not his wife nor his daughter. I couldn't avoid him and spoke to him in my shocked state like an incoherent idiot. The two stopped holding hands and she quickly faded out of view while he talked to me about our mutual interests as if nothing had happened.

I have seen hard-to-find employees snatched away from one firm by a competitor simply because loose lips let it be known of an employee's discontent to the wrong friends.

Yet another dicey situation comes to mind that is still fresh so its details also need to be disguised. Zak, a close friend of mine, advised me that he was forming a business relationship with Barry, which was just idle chatter as far as I was concerned. About a week later, Zak provided me with a piece of information I knew something about, but I could not imagine how Zak would know this. So I asked: "Where did you find this out." His "A little birdie told me" response doesn't seem like much of a hint; but the data was so unusual I had to ask: "Is the birdie this Barry?" "Yes," Zak replied. Right there and then I realized that Barry fit a puzzle I was musing on, and in a critical way. I had to inform Zak that he could never share anything with me that related to Barry because of a clear business conflict. I also had to disconnect part of my relationship with Zak, so I would not to be seen myself to be in a conflict of interest creating, personally, a very painful situation.

This is just a start; my list is endless. By being a 'silent' participant I have benefitted enormously.

Do not forget about the collateral damage! Besides giving the competition the edge, loose lips in the form of gossip, innuendo, and wild speculation create pain within the office that is deep and difficult to pass off as 'harmless'. It can be the reason for good people wanting to jump ship.

The bottom line is as simple as was explained to me while a young engineer when each day I was locked in my laboratory with three other engineers because of the confidentiality of our military electronics project. That axiom was: **share company information only on a need-to-know basis**. That axiom still holds true today. Things that happen at the office should not be carried home to a spouse or anyone else – unless there is a need to know; otherwise you may, in fact in all probability will¹, cause irreparable harm.

Stop sharing stories unnecessarily. Accept your responsibility to keep information confidential. Follow the edict of respect which means always respecting other people's information.

Good luck with your growing list of 'secrets'.

Bill

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¹ The CCCC work on 'Chaos theory', the 'high incidence of coincidence' and 'six degrees of separation' show the probability of unexpected coincidence is ten to 150 times higher than imagined.