

Secrets Sue Thompson

As human beings, we all have secrets...things about us that no one else knows. Sometimes our secrets are pieces of our lives that we haven't shared yet because it just hasn't come up or because we don't know the other person well enough to reveal personal information. Often, however, I keep information secret because it's risky or embarrassing. I'm afraid that if you know the "truth" about me, you'll think less of me.

While we all have secrets, keeping secrets requires work. When I have secrets, I have pieces of myself that I must be "on guard" not to let slip out. That means there are parts of me that I can't show. Keeping those parts hidden, uses some of my energy resulting in me having less energy available in other parts of my life. The more secrets I have, the more energy is required to keep those parts of myself hidden. With less energy available, my world becomes more and more constricted. It's as if a part of my life blood drains away. I live in a smaller and smaller part of myself.

Ironically, when I share my secrets with you, it brings us closer together. It creates a bond of intimacy that connects us at a deeper level. By knowing my secrets, you experience more of my humanity. I seem more "real" to you...more like you. As you connect to me more deeply, you're more inclined to share your secrets with me and then we're in relationship. We see more of who each other truly is. Our relationship becomes more honest and authentic.

I was the primary care taker for my mother during the final months of her life. One particular week, I was out of town teaching a workshop, but checking with nurses regularly. At a lunch break, I took a very difficult call from a nurse. As I grabbed my lunch and sat down at the table, a class member said, "How are you doing?" My normal response would have been "just fine".

But I wasn't fine and I surprised myself and offered, "I'm struggling a bit. My mother is dying of cancer and it's really hard." The class member moved a bit closer and shared, "I lost a family member to cancer recently

and I know how hard it can be.” Concerned, I asked, “A family member?” He said, “Yes, I recently lost my 9 year old daughter to cancer.”

That launched us into one of the most touching conversations I’ve ever had and it completely changed the nature of the relationship I had with this man. I’ll never forget him. It happened because I chose, in that split second, to share my “secret.”

Organizations, also, have secrets. One form of organizational secret are issues we deem “un-discussable”...things that we all know are true that we don’t or can’t talk about. A leader who espouses teamwork and then insists on making all the decisions, often doesn’t get discussed...at least in his/her presence.

Frequently, organizational secrets become underground jokes. They are alluded to tangentially or tongue in cheek, but are never directly discussed. The incompetence of a key leader is a “secret” that isn’t openly discussed, as is a leader’s moodiness, anger or other idiosyncrasy. It seems that everyone in the organization knows the secret, except the people who can do anything about it...and, of course, it is never discussed when they are around.

Two leaders who don’t get along, is another common secret. Each leader’s staff knows that he/she doesn’t like or respect the other, but it is never dealt with directly. Each team “dances” around the secret like it didn’t exist and an incredible amount of energy is expended acting as if the two leaders get along. The bottom line is that the “dancing” takes energy and is unproductive.

Keeping secrets in organizations consumes a lot of energy. This means that energy is less available for more productive uses like selling product or getting new customers. Too many secrets can actually choke the life blood out of an organization. This is why many organizations choose to “go outside and get new blood,” when they seek a new leader. New people are not caught up in the old network of delusion. They don’t know that the secrets are “secret.” They are much more willing to acknowledge what they see. This behavior oftentimes makes the un-discussables discussable - which, once the “shock” wears, off frees up energy for more productive uses. It literally breathes new life into an organization.

Raising un-discussable issues in an organization is often felt to be a career limiting act. Because some issues aren't discussed, they fade from consciousness for senior people. The situation is taken for granted. "That's just the way we do it here....or that's just the way it is." Any questioning or challenge is viewed as "inappropriate." In fact, raising an un-discussable issue is a courageous act. Organizations and/or leaders can only fix what they are aware of and conscious about. While gaining that awareness is frequently uncomfortable, and some times embarrassing, it is the first step towards repairing a problem.

Effective leaders realize that the more "secrets" that exist within an organization, the less effective the organization will be. They realize that it's their job to create the situations and environment that helps people raise un-discussable or difficult issues. Leaders must acknowledge that while they may not know what the difficult or un-discussable issues are, they do know that they exist. They acknowledge that it is likely that aspects of their management style are undoubtedly "un-discussable." They openly ask for feedback on what they can do to be more effective. They seek coaching to improve. They acknowledge past mistakes. They take personal responsibility for the fact that things in the organization are not perfect. They acknowledge their contribution to problems. Then, they publicly demonstrate their willingness to be confronted and to discuss difficult issues.

Sometimes an outsider can surface issues at less risk. Regardless of who confronts the boss, how he/she responds speaks volumes about how safe it will be for others to raise difficult issues. The boss may get defensive...it's part of human nature, but curiosity is imperative. He/she must be willing to understand the issue that is being raised and must be willing to ask questions and engage in a discussion about why others see things the way they do.

Just as personal relationships deepen when "secrets" are shared, people are more connected to organizations that seek to minimize the number of issues that are un-discussable. They can trust what they see. The rules are clearer. They can put their energy to productive use. In the long run, everyone benefits.