

Keep it to yourself: The importance of discretion

Does your role require you to maintain confidentiality? Being discreet is an invaluable trait, as many admins are privy to sensitive information—from who's being let go to upcoming budget projections. The importance of discretion was recently reinforced during a panel discussion I moderated with four senior executive assistants (EA) who work for high-powered individuals, including ambassadors, secretaries of state and leaders of Fortune 50 companies.

"Information is a currency in any company," said one EA, "and unfortunately, assistants often trade that currency among themselves. They satisfy their curiosity about what is going on in one department by revealing what is going on in theirs."

"While some employees seem annoyed that they can't regard me as a fountain of information," she said, "generally people just don't share gossip with me or ask me what I know."

The payoff? She is well-respected for her ability to maintain confidentiality. Her boss recently paid her a high compliment when he noted that her seeing his emails was no different from his seeing them. He knew the content of those emails remains private.

Another EA I interviewed is so conditioned to keeping information about her job private that her own mother once asked her if she worked for the CIA. (She doesn't, by the way.)

No matter how friendly you are with your team, you must respect the confidentiality required of your position, from both a moral and often a legal perspective.

So what do you do when a friend or respected colleague asks you for private information she knows you possess?

It's a perfect opportunity to speak your truth: "Asking me for that information puts me in an awkward position, as you're someone I respect and care about. Yet, sharing this information makes me uncomfortable, as I need to keep my word to keep it confidential. I hope you respect that if you asked me to keep something private, I would honor your request as well."

Your ability to protect confidential information increases the trust others place in you and increases your value to your employer.

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