

Problem Solving 39
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Susan Pinker

Dear Susan:

When I was hired a couple of years ago I was asked by my employer not to discuss my salary with other coworkers. She said she was offering me more than what other employees at my level were being paid and did not want me to foment discontent. I agreed at the time, but I'm now concerned that more recent hires or even those who were hired before me may be earning more despite having similar experience, competence, and responsibilities. I also think there may be a gender disparity in salaries.

How can I find out what my fellow workers are earning? Is there any way I can find out other than asking them? Is there a way to ask them diplomatically without seeming too intrusive? I imagine they were also told not to tell when they were hired. If they tell me, and I then confront my boss, I wouldn't want to get them or myself into trouble. Is this an issue of don't tell, don't ask?

Working Woman with a Secret

Dear Working Woman:

Like truth or dare, this is a game you can't really win. Now that you've agreed not to discuss your salary, you can't very well ask your co-workers to reveal theirs (not that they would tell). Yet the suspicion that you've been had will eat away at you until you know the score. Family therapists know that longstanding secrets have a way of corrupting relationships, especially when collusion is involved. The question now is how to resolve your uncertainty without violating your co-workers' privacy or jeopardizing your job.

One way to do this is to go back to your employer and clarify why she made this request, gently voicing your anxiety about gender disparities. You could say, "Now that a few years have gone by I feel uncomfortable about our agreement to keep my salary a secret. Let's talk about this." This gives her the opportunity to understand your concerns, which are likely to cause problems in the long run if everyone is silent on the issue. Speaking up may feel risky, but if it's done without confrontation, criticism or hostility, discussion can pay off in a more productive working relationship, according to Leslie Perlow, a corporate ethnographer from Harvard who has just published a book about the costs of silencing conflict and dissent at work (*When You Say Yes But Mean No*). "If it's a core issue to getting the work done, there should be no secrets," Perlow said, "because ultimately that undermines trust, and that's bad management," she said.

But how to get at the truth is not the only interesting question. I wonder why you made a vow of secrecy to your employer in the first place. There's new evidence that women tend to sell themselves short during salary negotiations because they are

uncomfortable estimating their worth in the workplace, leaving this critical detail up to the employer. “Comments in our study suggest that men see the salary negotiation as an opportunity to advance their own interests, whereas women believe the negotiation might damage their reputation or their relationships,” commented Lisa Barron, lead investigator in a study that examined how 38 recent MBA graduates at University of California fared in mock job interviews. Although admittedly a small sample, Barron was able to tease out why the women ended up with lower salaries when negotiating for the same job. Seventy-one percent of women said their salary should be commensurate with others of their level, whereas the same proportion of men claimed they were entitled to more than their peers. Eighty-three percent of the women said that they needed to prove themselves on the job, compared to the majority of men who said that the interview or performance evaluation was the time to do this. Maybe that’s why you agreed to keep quiet about your salary, because you didn’t believe that you should be earning more than anyone else. And that’s the real secret. If you feel differently now, don’t ask, but do tell your boss respectfully, that you think you’re worth more.

Dear Susan:

I’m a school teacher. I wanted to leave 20 minutes early on a Friday to catch a plane. Like a dutiful employee, I made sure all my students and dismissal duties would be covered by my colleague well in advance. When I asked for permission from my superior (also well in advance), my request was met with a distinctly negative attitude and subsequent interactions between us were chilly. Would you believe that the following weekend my superior leaves a few hours early on a Friday and notifies no one? What can I do about this double standard?

Resentful

Dear Resentful:

Not much. Now that you know about your superior’s inflexibility, store this little factoid away for future reference. Next time you travel, book your tickets outside of school hours. But make sure to reserve some leisure time to scout out other teaching opportunities. Honest educators who are excited about teaching and seriously committed to their work are in great demand.

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