

Article

SHARE YOUR SECRETS

– And build up psychological
and mental capacity

implementconsultinggroup.com



By Christina Hersom,
chhe@implement.dk,
Implement Consulting Group

We all have secrets. Some we share, some we don't. But is there a reason to start sharing your secrets, even with your colleagues? Research shows that by doing so, you will free up mental capacity while building stronger social bonds – **all of which enhance a strong team spirit and thus productivity at work.**

I have a confession - can I share my secret with you?

Okay – let's just stop here before you continue reading. What just happened when I asked you that question? Usually, when people say they want to share a secret with us, we lean in, focus our attention and expect a good story. This releases adrenaline hormones into our bodies and gives our brains a little kick. Whether we are about to be told something trivial or something quite serious – or maybe an exciting piece of information that is exclusively for us: Yes – we would really love to hear it!

Secrets are everywhere

It is very individual what makes up a secret. Privately, it may relate to family, friends or memories of past traumas – or it may be an amazing yet shameful memory from childhood that is of great importance but has never before been told. In the corporate setting, you may have overheard a colleague's private conversation and promised not to tell, you may know about future organisational changes that will bring about radical change or you may be part of HR, handling tough truths as part of confidential employee information.

Or maybe, you simply plan to quit your job and would rather that your colleagues do not know. All these secrets may potentially become burdens to carry around on our own.

Recently, I worked with a team of business leaders. We worked with their mental diversity and agile thinking, and we talked about their visions for the company compared to the reality. Suddenly, one leader stated that she would like to express how she really felt – and a silence spread across the room. Slowly, she said: “I’m being really honest now ... Even though I know it can have consequences ... And I haven’t told you before.” This caused the room to become almost completely silent. And then she talked about how frustrated she was about what they did. She felt this frustration so deeply that she had lost her sense of meaning, even though her engagement at work was still expected. Another team member joined in on the conversation and framed her story in his perspective. And consequently, they started talking about it in new ways, not to find any solutions, but just to discuss it. I think this sharing of her secret opened up a new and honest way of seeing and meeting each other and a higher quality in their leader conversations.

I know of another team that has established a habit at their meetings. They always ask each other: “How’s life?” Spending time on this, they have decided to share whatever secrets they want with each other. Some are emotional, some are from the private sphere. What is important is that they have made the space open for sharing secrets. The ambition is to live in an organisation fit for humans, where they can bring their whole selves to work rather than just bringing half of themselves and playing the corporate theatre.

When we take each other’s experiences seriously (Stacey, 2003), we know that teams become stronger and thrive and perform better. Together, the team can handle inner struggles and secrets and make sense of them in order to cope with life and its adversity also outside the team. If team members want to, they can

share secrets and gain perspectives on them, supported by empathy, meaningful conversations and mutual sharing. This is something that the many leader teams I work with can really learn from.

But even if you are on a secure and collective platform where burden-sharing is acceptable, secrets are paradoxical, as a secret is precisely a piece of information that we would rather not share with anyone – but at the same time, it is also tempting to share with an appropriate confidant. At least only one. Or two. But words are not “for free”, so there is an important (and perhaps difficult) choice to make about whether the secret should be shared or not.

The psychology of self-disclosure

Most people carry secrets – both their own and other’s. And carrying secrets can be difficult, because we often want to share them with someone. This enhances the risk of spreading the secrets.

But why do we inherently want to share our secrets? Science tells us that by revealing ourselves to others – i.e. by telling secrets – we ultimately define ourselves and try to make meaningful connections between our past experiences and our conception of the future. As humans, we are constantly seeking meaning, and it has always been one of the primary motivations for human beings and part of (re)gaining mental health (Frankl, 1963). When we create meaning, we define our identities through our narratives (White, 1995) which has an influence on our psychological and mental health (Pennebaker and Seagal, 1999). And in case of adversity or challenging experiences, we would usually go from refusal and denial to a process where we can gradually cope with the situation by finding a new way of interpreting what went wrong and integrating it into our narrative to put the world back together (Baumeister, 1991). It is in this light that we must see our innate desire to share our secrets.



But there is still a paradox to revealing a secret. If revealed, then somebody knows, and we don't really know what the consequences will be. Maybe that's why we sometimes tell secrets to a neutral person such as our dentist, hairdresser or taxi driver. It might be because it is a neutral zone, and it doesn't really matter if that other person judges us or not. The chance that they will use our secret against us also seems reasonably small, and as we are not related as such, there is no notable consequence if they decide to pass our secret on.

The mental health benefits of sharing a secret

We should share more secrets, and there are many reasons why. One is that we use a lot of mental capacity keeping secrets. A study showed that we are actually thinking about a secret three times more often than actively hiding it from others. This results in a cognitive burden that is associated with poorer mental and physical health (Slepian, Chun and Mason, 2017). So, just thinking about our secrets can burden us and thus decrease our motivation seen from this cognitive perspective.

We must consider disturbing thoughts when we build psychological and mental health as they are an important resilience factor (Reivich and Shatté, 2003). Neuroscience can explain how a secret will create conflict in the brain. By not allowing the cingulate cortex, (which is naturally wired to tell the truth) to perform its natural functions, it causes the cortex to become stressed. It will cause an increase in cortisol levels, affect memory, blood pressure, gastrointestinal tract and metabolism – all of which will affect our emotional and physical well-being (Slepian, Masicampo and Ambady, 2014).

But it can be difficult to reveal a secret, especially if the experience is related to guilt or shame. However, as we reveal a secret, we are initiating change as we open ourselves to hear other people's perspective on the issue. Sensemaking happens when we reframe our experi-

ences and assimilate them into our world views. Thus, when we share a secret and get other people's perspectives, we gain new knowledge about the meaning of the situation. This can create a sense of control over the situation and consequently our lives (Pennebaker, 1990).

At the same time, sharing a secret takes the social stress away from hiding the secret from people we really don't want to reveal it to. The relief happens because it is stressful to keep thinking about the information. Thinking about it reminds us that we actually have a secret and hence, we act in a non-authentic way – perhaps contrary to our core values and understanding of who we are as individuals.

So, keeping or revealing a secret is psychologically complex. But by revealing it, we can take a lot of pressure away from ourselves and increase our psychological well-being and mental capacity achieved within the social context. I wonder if these positive effects can help explain why we reveal our secrets – even to the taxi driver ...

Social support in the workplace

Sometimes, we face adversities and here, our social relations are a very important resilience factor that enable us to hold pressure and bounce back (Southwick and Charney, 2012). When we share our inner thoughts, we create a social reciprocity that creates trust and an even stronger relationship.

We know the use of social reciprocity from psychology, for instance from Carl Rogers' "client-centred therapy". In his therapy, Rogers believed that we could help people by being truly ourselves, showing unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding (Rogers and Sanford, 1985). To counteract a client's tendency to hold emotions back, the therapist could incorporate some disclosure (perhaps similar to the client's) so the client would feel that it's okay to show their own feelings without fear of being judged. From this mutual sharing, the client could be helped to reach a more

congruent view of himself or herself. This form of tactical empathy is used in many professional areas today, where self-disclosure is essential to creating trust when desired or needed (Voss and Raz, 2016). From the dynamics in these processes, we can learn something about the dynamics of the relationship and how honest self-disclosure plays a central role in the development and maintenance of social relationships.

A meta-study (Collins and Miller, 1994) found that we give other people a good impression of ourselves when we show emotions, because we seem willing to share our personal information. The other person tends to reciprocate our behaviour because he or she assumes that we like and trust them (social attraction trust) when we reveal something to them. Another dynamic we use to balance our relationships in the interpersonal system is social exchange (I tell you, you tell me). This process makes us feel that we know and understand each other better and at the same time, we show that we value the other part, and therefore we adapt to each other. Some researchers examined the effects of immediate reciprocity in interactions among strangers. The participants engaged in reciprocal interactions for just 12 minutes and this clearly influenced the extent to which they liked each other (Sprecher, Treger, Wondra, Hilaire and Wallpe, 2013). However, despite the ability to connect fast as humans, trust and self-disclosure doesn't just happen.

At work, we are within formalised frameworks. But here, we still act as we do in our intimate relationships and test each other as we gradually tell more and more from our inner thoughts to each other. In the professional context however, it is always important to consider what to share and what not to share. There are always consequences of sharing some deep and private information, and the outcome also depends on the feedback from the significant other (people who matter to you) that we choose.

My best advice: share your secrets step-by-step

So, now we know why we should share our secrets. But how do we do that? From reading literature (Kelly, 2012) and research studies within this topic, my best advice would be to share your secrets step-by-step.

In the workplace, it is really important that you pay attention and take care of who you share your inner most thoughts with. Maybe you can find a single confidant that can (help you) keep your secrets. And always remember to ask for permission. This is key to avoiding negative consequences such as damaging your social reputation, being rejected by the listener or forming a negative opinion of yourself because you know others are aware. As one of the leading researchers in this field, Anita E. Kelly (1999) advises that your confidant must be a discreet person, a person who will be non-judgemental and a person who is able to offer new insight into the secret.

What about the content? What can we share? I would argue that it depends on the relationship and the psychological safety that characterises it. Tactically, it is best to start with neutral topics before taking a deep dive into secrets from your deep, dark, inner past (if that is what you want to share). If you sense that you are going too deep with your story, then pull out so the other person will remain comfortable. You must be aware and pay attention to the other person's language, paralanguage (tone) and body language. If you observe or feel any incongruousness, then you label it and listen to the answer, so you will know if the content is appropriate, too heavy a burden to hold or if it's refused already.

We are hunting the good stuff here – it's building up psychological resources and mental resilience seen as organisational human capabilities. The health and performance implications of sharing a secret provide plenty of good reasons to lean in and share your secret with somebody ...

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