The Importance of Confidentiality and Trust

"Shhh... Can you keep this quiet?" Certainly most of us have heard that phrase at one time or another from a boss or a colleague in the course of our careers. Sometimes it relates a particularly sensitive piece of information about the organization that has critical importance to a business strategy, and sometimes it is mere gossip that even high-level executives can't seem to help themselves control, even though they know they should.

Either way, how we handle confidential information can define us as professionals, and have a big impact on the level of trust and respect our employees, clients, news reporters, elected officials, and even our competitors have for us. Whether the information is grounded in facts or simply put out there by someone trying to think through a situation and what it means, it is incumbent on us to keep a lid on it unless there is clear agreement among the parties on how to proceed with publicizing it.

In each of our practice areas, client confidentiality plays a vital role. Whether it is a sensitive public relations issue, an effort to try to influence public policy, or assisting with the development of a strategic direction for an organization, our ability to be keep client information private becomes as important as any great ideas we may have on what they should or should not do. It is the very foundation of a trusted relationship - and can elevate us to that highest level in the consultation hierarchy -- the 'trusted advisor.'

When you get right down to it, our ability to manage and position sensitive information properly is probably one of the most critical things we'll ever do, and it will create an atmosphere where leaders will seek our guidance and insights -- not even because of what we'll say, but as much for what we won't.

So the next time someone says to you "Shhh... can you keep this quiet?," consider carefully what they are asking you to do, and what you do next. They are depending on you.

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