

Privacy Is A Funny Thing

I recently had an advising colleague make the following observation:

Always – always – assume whatever you say at work will spread at work. Even with the things you explicitly say in confidence, there are a million and one reasons someone could think it sensible to share what you said, so it's best to assume things will get around, and be prepared to stand by things that shouldn't get around but might.

This made me think about an important distinction: The right to privacy and the reality of privacy.

The right to privacy refers to any situation in which you have a reasonable expectation that your thoughts and feelings are being shared in confidence.

The reality of privacy is that our right to privacy isn't always honored. That is, people don't always keep secrets nor do they always know when to remain silent. Sometimes it's because of bad motives. Sometimes it's because of a sincere mistake. Either way, good motives or not, some things are made public when they should have been treated with discretion.

Given the gap between the right to privacy and the reality of privacy, it behooves everyone to conduct themselves in a manner they're willing to stand by as much as possible. And when we choose to let our guard down, we should vet the parties we share our innermost thoughts with in a way that goes beyond "he/she seems like a nice person to talk to."

I don't think it's possible or healthy to treat the private/public distinction as if it doesn't matter. We need spaces for conversation where we have a good reason to believe things will be kept in confidence. But it can be a life-saver, a career-saver, or a relationship-saver to think twice before sharing secrets especially if other people are involved.

Your right to privacy should be respected at all times. Sometimes it won't be. No one gets this concept right all the time, but it's still useful to keep it in mind.