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WORK & FAMILY
By SUE SHELLNBARGER



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sue Shellenbarger writes Work & Family on Thursdays. The goal of the column is to help readers manage the relationship between work and their family and personal lives. It focuses on innovative solutions to work-family conflict, new strategies for helping people balance their lives, and new trends and developments that affect readers' work-life balance.

Sue has been a Wall Street Journal reporter, editor, bureau chief and columnist for 25 years, working in Chicago and, currently, from her home outside Portland, Ore. She is a former contributing editor to Parenting magazine. She has received several national awards, including Best General Interest Column from the National Society of Newspaper Columnists in 2000 and the Work-Life Legacy Award from the Families and Work Institute in 2005. Sue grew up on a farm in Leonidas, Mich., and has a master's degree in journalism from Northwestern University.

Off the job, she hikes, reads, camps, listens to music and cares for her two children, Cristin and James, and her stepchildren, Margaret, Richard and Lucas.

MORE SHELLENBARGER

Sue Shellenbarger draws heavily on mail and faxes for material for her column and can be reached via fax at 503-636-6951 or at sue.shellenbarger@wsj.com.

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Ovulating? Depressed? The Latest Rules On What Not to Talk About at Work

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In an era when almost anything goes, are any topics still taboo at work?

Robert Turnbull and his wife Lisa Meeder Turnbull wrestled with that question when they were undergoing infertility treatment. Mr. Turnbull sometimes had to delay business trips to make their appointments.

Somehow, "my wife will be ovulating," seemed a little bold as an excuse to offer his boss, says Ms. Turnbull, of Freeport, Maine. "Though we could laugh privately about what would happen if he were honest, there was a genuine tension for him in finding the right balance of disclosure and discretion."

Even today, when actors routinely have sex on TV and the headlines feature sensitive topics ranging from libido-enhancing drugs to euthanasia, there are some things bosses and co-workers just don't want to know. But what are those things? A societal shift toward more diversity in lifestyles has changed the rules on what is OK to talk about at work and what isn't. That can make it hard sometimes to figure out what not to say. Richard Brenner, a team-building specialist with Chaco Canyon Consulting, Boston, sees the tension as "a symptom of a society in transition."

What's Taboo
Topics to avoid at work

- **Usually off limits:**
 - Sexually transmitted disease
 - Domestic violence
 - Mental illness
 - Alcohol/drug abuse
 - Fertility problems
- **Best to steer clear, to be safe:**
 - Political beliefs
 - Religious beliefs

Source: Rick Brenner, Chaco Canyon Consulting, Boston

Credity Images

Tom Casey of Buck Consultants, New York management consultants, adds, "It used to be more black-and-white. There were 'The Four Horsemen' you didn't talk about: Politics, religion, race and gender. Now, people aren't quite as guarded about opening the door" on those topics and others, from sex to bodily functions.

Even the nightly news can be a minefield. "The recent bombings in London were horrific," says Robert Remler, a New York data controller. "Suppose, however, that you work with Brits. How far do you want to take that conversation during work hours? Do you want to get into a discussion about who is doing a better job fighting terrorism? Blair? Bush?"

It usually is best to keep quiet on topics that impose a lot of intimate detail or are so deeply emotional that they risk offending someone who might feel differently.

Mike Farrell was annoyed when a former employee kept telling him stories about her sexual exploits "in great and copious detail." It was just "too much information," says the Tacoma, Wash., management consultant. "People seem to see no difference between an intimate conversation and a conversation at the water cooler."

Too many medical details can cause problems, too. Manuel Prado, president of vivacorporation.com, a San Francisco provider of medical-transcription services, was dismayed when a former employee began "spilling her guts" at length about her emotional

problems and detailing the long list of prescription drugs she was taking to cope. The problems hadn't affected her work. But being cast as Dr. Phil made him "very uncomfortable," Mr. Prado says. "I just don't think I needed to know all that."

As for the couple undergoing fertility treatments, wisely, Mr. Turnbull decided to explain his work interruption by citing a "plain-vanilla doctor's appointment," his wife says, which worked fine.

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Certain old prejudices, such as the stigma society places on mental illness, still have power at many companies. After a top-rated manager at a Kansas health-care company was diagnosed with depression, he decided to tell co-workers on the well-intentioned belief that "people like me must take chances if we want to destigmatize mental illness." His five-employee work team was shocked but ultimately supportive. Reactions further up the food chain, however, weren't so sympathetic. The manager found himself under fire from a corporate executive who seemed to believe depression would hurt his performance, he says. He eventually

resigned for that and other reasons.

Beware of gender differences. In some workplaces, taboos differ for men and women, Mr. Brenner says. Consider menopause: While a female boss might be entirely comfortable with your announcing that you're having a hot flash, a man might squirm in dismay.

And heed the generation gap. Many people grow more reserved with age and might prefer to hear less, not more. I was self-revelatory to a fault in my youth, afflicting my older bosses with emotion-laden tales from my miscarriage fears to my late mother's last words. I never asked if they wanted to hear; most likely they felt like slapping a little duct tape over my mouth. Now, at 53, I err more often in the opposite direction. After my divorce in 2000, it took me more than a year to tell my bosses. Looking back, that was a mistake, causing me to miss an opportunity to build stronger relationships.

Today's new openness has done more than confuse people, however. Down the road, as we figure out case by case where to draw the line, it will have major benefits, breaking down old prejudices and expanding the potential for constructive change at work.

Sharing information is required to build trust. To that end, in a few good workplaces, employees already are able to break all the rules. Steve Miksis, a manager at a California accounting firm, often recommends to co-workers that they share personal matters with a top manager. He does so because he knows, after telling his bosses about a suicide in his own family, that they're sensitive and respectful.

He has seen trust grow at his office as a result. Sometimes, "we get so caught up in our roles at work," he says, "that we forget that our co-workers are our fellow human beings."

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