OPENING UP CAN CULTIVATE BETTER WORK RELATIONSHIPS

Sunday Tribune · 17 Mar 2019 · 20 · CASSIE WERBER Werber is a renewable energy reporter for Quartz.

WHILE many of us might like our colleagues and feel comfortable disclosing personal struggles, social norms often check our desires to talk about which gender we’re attracted to, our home-life issues or the chronic pain we’re suffering from.

Now a study on revealing or hiding “stigmatised identities” suggests that in some specific cases, it’s worth being open at the office. Revealing and talking about personal information that’s not readily apparent might feel like a big deal, but overall can have a positive impact on relationships with colleagues.

The findings come from an analysis of 65 studies on stigmatised identity and relationships. The study, led by psychologists at Rice University in Houston, Texas, was to be published in the Journal of Business and Psychology.

In their initial analysis, the researchers found little evidence revealing “marginalised” identities had any impact on work relationships or well-being.

But a second round of analysis, which looked at potentially significant variables, found that the “visibility” of the trait a person was sharing mattered.

If a person’s condition was not readily visible – for example, if they had mental health issues – and that person revealed it to their colleagues, the co-workers tended to react positively.

Talking about something potentially stigmatising and personal to one’s colleagues was therefore more likely to deepen relationships than to push people away.

The study suggests that the key to the positive reaction of one’s colleagues is the sharing of new, intimate knowledge – “not on the stereotypes or nature of the stigmatised identities in question, but rather on the degree of information that is being shared”.

Telling a colleague something personal which they didn’t know can improve your relationship with that person, the authors say, even if there are “negative” connotations associated with the trait in society or at work.

But when people talked about more obvious identities, colleagues didn’t feel closer and sharers didn’t feel better about themselves. Examples include gender and race: talking about either in relation to one’s own identity elicited more negative reactions.

Eden King, one of the study’s co-authors, suggested that was because such talk might be seen as advocacy for or “heightened pride” in a particular identity.

This experience was reflected in a representative survey of about 2200 Americans carried out by Quartz and Surveymonkey Audience in January. It found women were more likely than men
to say they couldn’t be themselves at work, and a higher proportion of black people than any other race also felt it to be impossible.
The takeaway? Sharing personal, identity-related struggles or joys at work is likely to have a beneficial effect, which is good news for people who would like to talk about their gender identity, HIV status or mental health, but worry how their co-workers will react. But those same co-workers are likely to be less sympathetic to a discussion of the problems related to things they already see and therefore feel, rightly or wrongly, they know about.