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## Life at Work

Amy Joyce



### More Than You Ever Wanted to Know

Open-Door Policies Can Be Abused if Managers Aren't Clear on Boundaries

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Have you, as a manager, ever felt that your "open door" policy was a little too open? It's great that your employees feel comfortable enough to tell you exactly why they need next Thursday off. But then, as they go into great detail about their gangrenous toe, doesn't it seem there comes a point when a manager becomes more counselor and less boss?

Managers walk a blurry line when trying to be the best manager they can be. It's that line between being standoffish and being a soft shoulder to cry on. And then there is the little matter of Too Much Information.

**Heather Bradley, a career coach and co-founder of the Flourishing Company consulting firm, based in the District, said it is very common for open-door managers to fall off the line they're trying to walk. And then not only do they hear things they wouldn't necessarily want to hear, they find themselves constantly busy with things other than work.**

One manager at a Northern Virginia nonprofit agency hasn't gone so far as to install a therapy couch in her office, but some days she wonders why she isn't being paid the big psychologist bucks as she sits there listening to her employees spill their guts.

Like the woman who needed a day off to move her things out of her boyfriend's house. And who decided she would explain exactly why she needed to move out. Or the employee who likes to go into detail about the doctor's appointment coming up.

"Typically I just sit there and listen," the manager said. If it starts to get a little too detailed, she jumps in with, "Tell [the assistant] so he can put you on the

schedule!" But if after that the employee continues, she said, "I know I'm in it for the long haul."

An open-door policy is not a bad thing, considering the alternative, said Joy Hobgood, a human resources consultant and coach based in Hamilton, Va. So what if a boss is uncomfortable with a bit too much information? How will he or she feel about too little information? she wonders. **"Too many managers don't set expectations," said Bradley, the career coach, such as when that open-door policy is truly open-door, or what an open culture means, exactly. Then, once a person is in the door, a manager needs to know how to delegate,** which is what the nonprofit manager did when she suggested that a worker go to the employee assistance program after several installments of just too much personal information. This person wound up not going, but the manager felt she had made an honest attempt.

And that, said Steven Gaffney, author of "Just Be Honest: Authentic Communication Strategies That Get Results and Last a Lifetime," is an important thing managers must remember to do. From Gaffney's point of view, it's better to have a policy that allows everything to come in, so that a manager can decide what to do with it. It's better than not knowing what employees are going through at all.

The Northern Virginia manager is happy that her employees feel comfortable enough to tell her their life stories. But in addition to feeling like a "voyeur into a weird part of someone's life," the manager said, she is unsure how to follow up. Especially in a way that won't keep her tied up in "counseling" sessions. She wants to show she cares and is concerned, but "you don't want to push for Round 2."

"It can be a huge time [eater]," Gaffney said. He suggests that when someone comes in to complain about personal issues, and it seems like something the boss should not really deal with, that boss should turn it back on the employee with a little "So what do you think you should do about it?" That way, it shows that the manager cares, and that it's a situation the employee needs to deal with on his or her own time.

Why people feel the need to tell their boss every detail of an upcoming doctor appointment, or the child-support fight they are in, is unclear. Many theories abound, and I know I have blurted out a few too many of my own life stories to a boss or two over the years.

For one thing, I guess we want to let them know why we might be a little preoccupied, and why we're taking a vacation day next Thursday. But why go into such detail? Is it a hope to find a common thread to share with that person

whom you spend so much of your day with? Are people looking for a workplace friend or confidante? There certainly are stories of boss and employee turning into good buddies. They always sound so warm and cozy. **"The boss wants to be everything to everyone. They want to be a buddy," Bradley said.** But there is a line that has to be drawn by the employee as well. A boss is not a counselor. And although each case is different, sometimes it does a body good to talk to that boss about a few things that are going on. Especially if those things will affect work in any way. But too many details could spell disaster, or at least discomfort.

The nonprofit manager wonders when people tell her these things if they are looking for advice. But giving advice is the last thing she wants to do, for fear she will say the wrong thing. She voiced the feeling that so many managers out there have: "It's one side of management they don't prepare you for."

*Join Amy Joyce on Tuesdays from 11 a.m. to noon for her regular Life at Work live online discussion at [washingtonpost.com](http://washingtonpost.com).*

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