Written by Julie Desmond
Friday, 30 April 2010 23:37

During busy season, Karen's company keeps cots in a closet so employees can catch a nap while working all night on projects. Lea's best friends are the people she works with. She doesn't have time to forge friendships anywhere else. Spending forty or fifty hours a week with a group of people for months or years at a time, it seems natural that you would become friends, or even like family, after a while. But when is "close" too close? Where is the line between personal and professional, when you work alongside the same people day in and day out?

Religion and politics have long been taboo in the workplace. Yet, these topics are difficult to steer clear of because they often play a part in the news and TV shows we want to discuss, and because passion for a topic can override good judgement. Use your own expectations to test whether to step into or walk away from a conversation. Inviting your co-workers to a concert at your church might be acceptable; expecting them to meditate with you in the break room is not. When others cross that line, have a comment ready to use to excuse yourself. It can be simple, "I'd better get back to work." Say it politely, and then reinforce that boundary by walking away.

Childcare issues are another delicate area. I have seen many managers make project and promotion decisions based on their perception of what someone can handle, whether that perception is accurate or way off. When you are at work, everything is fine with the family. Remember that. And use your break or lunch hour to deal with family issues. If you are a single parent, find two or three back-up options for childcare so you can get to work when you need to.

If someone else in the office is giving too much information about their children or spouse, cut them off politely but with a simple statement such as, "You must be so proud of your little guy, but I'd better get back to my work." The physical act of turning away will usually end the conversation. It may seem rude; however, turning away often produces the surprising result of deference. When people know where your line is, they tend to respect it.

Disabilities, unrelated hobbies and salary issues are also off-limits, as is office gossip about employees not present. Assume that anything you say out loud in your workplace will be broadcast on speakers throughout the building because, often, that's more or less what happens. Ask yourself, first, whether this conversation has anything to do with work and, second, is it a conversation you would gladly share with everyone? If the answer to either question is no, walk away.

You want to be known at work for your professional accomplishments. Keeping your personal life, well, personal, will help you avoid the misunderstandings and misconceptions that can send your day and your career careening off track.

Julie Desmond leads 21st Century Job Search workshops for Help Wanted! Workshop in Minneapolis. Send your career planning and job search questions to julie@insightnews.com.