

"COVER-UPS: WHEN TO TELL, WHEN NOT TO TELL."

"Do not do all you can, do not spend all that you have, do not believe all that you hear, and do not tell all that you know."

Chinese Proverb

It was recently disclosed that in the Summer of 1944, at the height of World War II, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt made a decision to set aside major health concerns to run for a fourth term. He went to extraordinary lengths to shield his disability and illness from the public. Roosevelt extracted from his inner circle an oath of confidentiality not to divulge the seriousness of the situation. And he bypassed the comments of a prominent medical consultant who warned that the President would not survive the rigors of a fourth term. He won the election, and died several months later following a stroke.

This event raises a number of questions. Should the public have known about the President's fragile condition? Would such an admission of illness destabilize our national security, create apprehension among our allies, and increase our vulnerability with regard to our enemies? Did those in Roosevelt's inner circle counsel him not to run? And if they did not, why not?

Given Roosevelt's charismatic leadership of the free world and the perilous situation of war, was it an appropriate time for him to forge ahead and compromise his physical and perhaps mental strength? And was it realistic to believe his secret would remain undisclosed?

What makes this episode such a compelling contemporary story is that history has a way of repeating itself. Within the past several years, a number of prominent figures in politics, sports, religion, entertainment, business and academia have masqueraded as straight shooters, only to deceive and disappoint their followers.

Consider a recent scenario (a real story in which the names have been changed). Charles Black is the President of Neo-Tech, a successful public technology company. He has just concluded a meeting with a group of Wall Street analysts. And he has painted a rosy picture for the coming year. What he did not share with them was that he was scheduled to enter an alcohol detox center the following week. Obviously, he was concerned that such a disclosure would have a negative impact on the value of his company's stock. Rather than being candid, the company reported that Mr. Black had "taken a short leave of absence." Such an ambiguous line raised red flags and his secret boomeranged, plunging the price of the stock and leaving a bad taste in the mouths of analysts who felt they had been duped.

Most cover-ups typically share a number of characteristics: a need for secrecy, a fear of being perceived as not being in control, a concern about negatively impacting their company morale, and anxiety about appearing vulnerable to their shareholders and competitors.

In every situation in which there may be something to hide, there are tried and true rules that apply to leaders and to members of their inner circle, about who to tell, when to tell and when not to tell. They include the following:

1. People are entitled to their privacy. But when a person carries a public trust that impacts the welfare of others, it changes the disclosure calculus. Carefully think through the circumstances regarding the pros and cons of your response. And use trusted associates who have the courage and objectivity to advise you.
2. A serious disclosure has a profound ripple effect. It impacts the individual, the organization, its constituents, its allies and those competitors that wish them harm.
3. Do not confuse being loyal with being protective. That's false loyalty. In many situations, protectiveness may be a political maneuver by members of the inner circle to gain the leader's favor and abdicate the responsibility of genuinely expressing concern.
4. Keep in mind that people have mixed agendas – they may want to protect their leader, but they may also want to protect themselves.

5. A secret is never a secret. Secrets eventually come out. In FDR's time, a secret had a better chance of remaining so, for a longer period of time. Today's technology has dramatically shortened the life span of a secret.

6. Build an appropriate safety net. FDR's advisors urged him to replace Vice President Henry Wallace with Harry Truman when Roosevelt ran for his fourth term. FDR's advisors knew his condition was deteriorating, and believed Truman would be a stronger successor. Always have a succession plan in place.

In summary, we feel Roosevelt made the appropriate move given his global leadership role and the tenuous circumstances of the time. In Charles Black's situation, his lack of disclosure was poorly planned and delivered with an ambiguous message, leading to significant uncertainty and collateral damage.

What are your thoughts about the pros and cons of disclosure? What's been your experience? Does a cover-up create more problems than being direct? **Let us hear from you!**

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