Don’t Fall for This (Old HR) Mind Trick Ever Again



“These aren’t the droids you’re looking for.” You can see Obi Wan now, can’t you? Waving his hand, directing the weak-minded stormtrooper to allow he and his fugitive companions to “move along.” Corporate recruiters and hiring managers have their version of this. Once you get hired, you undoubtedly hear some variant of the following: “You have one of the highest salaries on your team. Don’t tell ANYONE how much you make.” They may have even waved their hand around right in front of you.

But is it true? What incentive do the corporate recruiter and your manager have to tell you anything different? How would you even know if you’re not to discuss salary with colleagues?

Well, it just may be that you’re one of the highest paid people on your team. You may be the most qualified, have the most potential and the most experience in the area needed. It certainly strokes your ego to hear that you’re so well paid and valued so highly that even the rumor of your salary would spark envy among your teammates. In this way, you’re on the company’s side. Your interest is their interest.

Let’s be clear. This is nothing more than a manipulation tactic meant to keep salaries low. That’s the mind trick. Appeal to your ego so that you keep the lack of pay equity quiet. I admit it. It worked on me early in my career—until the time I found out that people brought into the company a level below me (and with less experience) were paid more than I was.

The conversation came up by chance in a group, but salaries were revealed. I immediately brought this revelation to my manager’s attention and, to her credit, she took on the challenge to fix the problem. After less than a month, the company made a salary correction for everyone at my level in the same situation. Total cost of the raises, you ask? Only $26,000. The ten of us who benefitted then became much happier and worked harder. That’s right. Pay equity brought better productivity and higher morale—and not one person left the company. If even ONE of us had left, it would’ve cost the company at least that much to replace that person.

In a recent New York Times article entitled, ***Secrecy About Salaries May Be on the Wane***, Dr. Edward Lawler III from the Marshall School of Business at USC sums up my experience nicely in this excerpt:

> Without [pay transparency], people can’t make meaningful career decisions and contest illegal and dysfunctional practices by companies,” he said. In addition, he says, “organizations would have better results and more satisfied employees if what they pay is made public, because so much of the information out there is erroneous.”

With the ubiquity of social media and generational embrace of openness, people are willing to share even the most sensitive information as long as there’s tangible benefit. In this case, pay inequities, discriminatory policies, and other unfair pay practices can be corrected, which puts real money in people’s pockets. I’d call that tangible benefit.

The activism in this space has skyrocketed in recent years. We’ve all heard of “Equal Pay Day”, the date on which women would receive the same pay as men had made the previous year if there were pay equity among genders (this year it was April 7). President Obama has signed multiple Executive Orders encouraging open discussions of salaries even beyond the rules in the **National Labor Relations Act** that make it illegal for companies to retaliate against employees who share salaries. The message: **don’t be afraid** to discuss salary among co-workers.

Avoid the **creepy factor** in prompting these salary conversations, of course, and you will get the answers you need. If you uncover a pay injustice, work to get it resolved quickly. And keep a positive attitude. This is not the time to blast *Fight the Power* in the break room. Successful resolution will boost morale on the team followed by productivity and retention. Your manager may not want the short-term headache, but show her that your team is worth the effort. When productivity and morale increase, everyone wins.

For you, your colleagues, and your company, share salary with others. Don’t fall for the mind trick.

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David Solomon is Founder and CEO of **SpringRaise**, a salary consultancy and technology firm based in Los Angeles. Spring Raise maximizes salary for clients through solutions that promote **pay equity** and **transparency**. David is also author of the highly successful salary negotiation guide, **Spring Raise Your Salary: How to “Spring” Your Salary to Change Your Life**. David earned his BS in Economics from The Wharton School at Penn and his MBA in Digital Strategy from UCLA. He sits on multiple boards and is a Henry Crown Leadership Fellow at The Aspen Institute.