The Down Side to Belonging

Not too long ago I was enjoying a holiday get together with my brothers and sisters when our conversation turned to events that happened when we were younger. As our conversation went on I was amazed by how important it was to feel that I belonged to something…in this case to my immediate family. It felt warm and comfortable. Although we had the normal ups and downs any family has as we were growing up nobody wanted to bring those occasions up. Instead our conversation centered on the happier moments of our childhoods. It was during this conversation that I was reminded of the importance human beings have to belong to something.

Since the beginning of time human beings have had a strong need to belong. In our early history we belonged to tribes or clans, oftentimes as a means of survival. As civilization expanded we found security within the safe confines of walled cities. Today we look to communities, churches, social service organizations, and an infinite variety of other organizations to fill our sense of belonging. All the while the family unit has served as the primary source of belonging.

We carry this same need to belong to the world of business. It can be a social service organization, a networking group, or even a department within our company, our need to belong is strong. Although the desire to belong to something is normal and carries many benefits with it there's a down side when it's carried too far.

In the family unit there are family secrets that are carefully guarded because we don't want to compromise the sanctity of the family. A spouse's heavy use of alcohol or abusive behavior; a child's indiscrete behavior; or a family member's particular interest in gambling.

In business this can become a problem when we avoid presenting

owners or key people in our organizations with bad news, or when their behavior is clearly inappropriate and compromises the future of the company. Sometimes this need to belong can overpower the need to do the right thing, and this can spell disaster for a business.

Let's face it the first job of every employee is to stay employed. And this usually means doing what's necessary to be a part of the team. Frequently this can also mean not bringing up subjects that need to be addressed, or not bringing negative, yet needed information to management, or discussing sensitive subjects with the boss for fear of being viewed as disloyal or not being a "team" player.

As I've stated before nobody wants to poke the bear and risk being the object of his wrath. It's much easier and safer to offer information that doesn't rock the boat, or supports the owner's preconceived opinions. It's even worse when someone withholds information altogether for fear of falling out of favor with the boss.

As owners and key managers if we're not vigilant the culture of healthy input we fostered early in our companies can degenerate into a culture of happy talk or group-think. When this happens our companies lose their edge and risk atrophying into non-existence.

How many times are the opinions people offer you on a subject, or input they give you when decisions have to be made being influenced by their innate desire to belong rather than on information that is critical to making good decisions? Are you getting their candid opinions? Or are they offering opinions they feel