

## **WORK IT RIGHT! - #2 Improving Relationships On and Off the Job**

**by Gini Graham Scott**

### **WATCH OUT FOR CONFIDENCES**

Becoming someone's confidant at work can be flattering. You feel trusted with someone's secrets, plugged in, and privy to behind-the-scenes gossip. You may experience a sense of power, since you are consoling someone and giving advice, so you feel helpful and in the know. But if you're not wary, what you know and what you share with the confider can backfire in your face.

That's what happened to Barbara, after becoming friendly with Nancy, a co-worker in a sales and marketing department. They shared many things that drew them together, such as being from the same city, in their 30s, and interested in the local art scene. They frequently lunched together and initially discussed projects at work.

But, after a few weeks, Nancy began sharing more personal observations and concerns with Barbara, such as a dispute with her landlord over a noisy tenant and her complaints about her hairstylist and ongoing battle with her mother-in-law. So what did Barbara think she should do?

Barbara felt touched when Nancy began sharing with her like a trusted friend, and she told Nancy about some of her own problems in turn, such as a dispute with a car salesman who overcharged her and how she quit her last job over a commission dispute with her employer. Then, as Nancy moved up the company ladder by working extra hours, Barbara felt privileged when Nancy began sharing her views about other

salespeople at the company and how they were doing or when they let her down with incorrect leads.

But while Barbara shared her sympathy, support, and advice, she never questioned the appropriateness of listening to such confidential information or considered the dangers of sharing herself.

Then, one day Barbara and Nancy had their own dispute about who should get a lead, and Nancy accused Barbara of poaching on her territory. As the argument escalated, Nancy brought up Barbara's car dispute, commission misunderstanding, and other problems Barbara had told her. Now Barbara felt suddenly on the defensive, as Nancy used her own confidences against her. At the same time, she recognized how, in her desire to help, she had overlooked how Nancy's confidences pointed to a trail of problems with people – and now Nancy viewed her as one of those problem people.

As a result, though they continued to work in the same office, the lunch-time sharings and after-work phone chats came to an abrupt end. And soon Barbara noticed that Nancy had become friends with a recently hired employee, and she worried that Nancy might be talking about her. Worse, since Nancy was on the fast track, she worried if she got promoted. Maybe someday Nancy could even be her boss.

Thus, there can be a big danger when someone at work starts to share personal confidences with you – and you share back. It can feel tempting to be let into someone else's secrets and hear the latest office gossip. You can gain a sense of power and one-ups-manship to hear others put down.

But the danger is you could be next. You could go from confidant to being the subject of confidences shared with someone else – an especially great risk when

someone shares confidences about their problems with other people. They already have a pattern of having left a trail of conflicts with others. And you can easily find yourself on that trail with them, too.

**Today's Take-Aways:**

- If someone leaves a trail of conflicts with other people, don't walk on the trail with them. You're likely to get stuck on that trail yourself.
- Beware the person who wants to fill you up with confidences. A too-full glass can overflow or break.
- Don't get caught playing the confidence-sharing game at work. It's like playing any confidence game. Play long enough, and you're likely to lose.

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