

Advice from the Trenches: Lost Glory

Dear C and Dr. B:

Back in the day, my friend Cynthia was a talented designer at a big ad agency where she won awards and was respected by her peers.

Everything fell apart when she found out her husband was cheating with someone at the firm. She went through a painful breakup, full of lies and betrayals. Instead of getting therapy, she made some bad decisions and ended up losing her house, her reputation, and her friends – it turns out that many of them weren't friends at all. Her drinking went out of control.

In the last year or so, she's finally gotten it together and now she is working again as a freelancer. When I wanted to put up a website for my skin salon, I asked her if she'd help me. I told her that I already had my concept and look, I just needed her to give me feedback and help me with the computer tech stuff.

It has become a nightmare. She keeps turning simple yes-no questions into an opportunity to show off and take over the focus like she's running an agency campaign. She has this attitude of "Hey, I'm the designer, remember? You hired ME."

I think I understand why this keeps happening – she wants to regain her self-respect. But it's irritating as hell. Is there some way to neutralize her, some therapy trick? I don't want to fire her and make her feel like a loser, but she's giving me an ulcer!

Dr. B says:

There is no therapy trick for this problem. Your situation shows why hiring friends can ruin friendships. It's the same reason that having sex with friends ruins the relationship. Dual roles cause boundary violations. You need to be able to fire a worker and that is very difficult if they are a friend.

You need to be honest with her and reiterate what your expectations were, but it probably won't work out and you will end up needing to let her go. If you value the friendship more than you do your website, you can just let her lead this project, say thank you, and never hire her again afterward; two captains cannot steer one ship. You can always just scrap the project afterward if it is not to your liking, but since it's a visible website she will know you didn't use it.

C says:

I see nothing wrong with hiring friends to work with you. Just about everyone I work with in the arts is a friend – but I only work with people who have a good attitude and don't bring their egos to the job, which is why we all remain friends.

Cynthia has a crappy attitude and she has not only brought her ego to the job, she is bulldozing you with it. This is garbage behavior and if you value the friendship, the very worst thing you could do would be to let her think she's in control, then never hire her again.

Her issues are going to drive other clients away too; for any freelancer, a bad attitude is a career killer.

The world has changed since the old agency days when account executives and their skilled, fast-talking creative teams ruled the commercial world. Designers got away with eccentric and egotistical antics because the PR people ran interference for them. But while ads are still plastered all over the media, the attitude of the average business owner has changed.

There are more small self-made businesses on the internet and most owners do not want a freelancer coming in and telling them how to represent themselves. What they really want is a good technician who knows how to listen and perhaps enhance their concept.

The only way to handle Cynthia is to be honest. However, not all honesty is created equal, and there is in fact a trick to it: lead with a positive.

Here's what NOT to say: "Cynthia, you are so freakin' bossy you make me want to vomit. Get out. I'll never hire you again." It may be true, but it's really mean, and it helps no one.

Instead, try: "Cynthia, you are an excellent designer and I have always admired the work you did with the agency. But this is my business and I have a very clear vision of the image I want to project. I need you to respect that or we can't work together."

People seldom tell each other uncomfortable truths - they just walk away. Only a real friend has the guts to be both honest and kind. If Cynthia wants to get her life back together it's the greatest favor you could do.

- Cathren Housley

You can visit Dr. B's blog at drbrilliantcliche.wordpress.com