

WORK IT RIGHT! - #4 Improving Relationships On and Off the Job

by Gini Graham Scott

WATCH OUT FOR THE EGGSHELLS

With some people you feel like you're walking on eggshells. Often they're very creative, dramatic, outgoing, charming, fun people. But they are overly sensitive to potential slights, and can erupt into tirades or sullen silences, if you say or do something to set them off. The experience is like walking through a field of eggshells – and breaking one can be especially dangerous if this is a boss, client, or project team leader.

That's what happened to Andy, an advertising account manager, when he worked with Cynthia, a product manager for an important client. Things would be going along very well, when suddenly, Cynthia would erupt over something he did or said. Though he often wasn't sure what that was, he desperately wanted to avoid doing it, afraid of maybe losing his job.

For example, one time Cynthia exploded when he was simply going over a long-time bill Cynthia's company was gradually, but very slowly, paying off. When Andy asked, "When?" that final payday might be, Cynthia blew up telling him: "Don't worry. You'll get your money," and accused him of being "insensitive" to bring up the subject. Then, Andy spent the new few minutes apologizing about how he hadn't intended to insult her.

Then, one day when Cynthia was out of the office and Andy called someone else in her company for information, Cynthia blew up again after he told her he had already gotten the data from her associate, accusing him of going around her.

Thus, increasingly, Andy felt uncomfortable working with Cynthia, yet wasn't sure what to do, since she was his agency's client. So the increasingly tense situation dragged on, while Andy feared the situation could easily blow up any moment, like a smoldering volcano.

Unfortunately, Andy's story is all too common with supersensitive people. Their emotions are right on the surface, ready to be rubbed raw at the slightest pressure. They are like thin eggshells, ready to break.

What should you do if you have to work with this type of person? One approach is to notice patterns. Ask yourself what type of questions, comments, or actions set them off? For example, Cynthia was very sensitive about any money questions or comments that showed how her company was struggling. Also, she reacted defensively to any comment that questioned her authority or knowledge, since these topics ate at her sense of self-worth, and her insecurities set her off.

Once you notice these sensitivity patterns in someone, avoid saying or doing whatever triggers a defensive reaction. Instead, say or do things to build up the person's self-esteem, since that's at the root of the supersensitive response. And if you are working with someone who is apt to explode at the press of a wrong trigger, seek to avoid pushing that trigger or igniting that spark. Or look for ways to dampen the powder, so it won't go off.

Today's Take-Aways:

- If you feel like you're continually walking on eggshells around someone, maybe it's time to be walking away.
- If you have to work with a supersensitive person with a supersoft shell, learn how to more gently handle the eggs, so they don't break.
- If you're trapped in a field of eggshells, be light on your feet to avoid breaking the shells.

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