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Forget the kid gloves

'Issues' employee shouldn't keep co-workers on pins and needles

By **DANIEL SCHROEDER**, for *Small Business Times*

Question: I'm having a really hard time getting along with one of my co-workers. She is really good at her job, she knows a lot about the work and can be a great help (when she feels like it). The problem is, if she's not in a good mood, it's like pulling teeth trying to talk to her. If she's having a hard time on a project, I've learned to leave her alone. When I've brought this up to her, she'll say something like, "You just don't understand me." That may be true, but I don't think she understands herself. Most of the time, I'm on pins and needles wondering if today is going to be a "good" day or a "bad" day. What do you think I should do to help her get a better handle on how she comes across to the rest of us?

Answer: Your question is one that I am sure many readers can identify with. Every workplace seems to have at least one employee

who requires "kid gloves" treatment. The basic issue here is that your colleague sees herself differently than others see her. What needs to happen is that these differing perceptions need to be brought into alignment.

Each of us differs in the extent to which we are skillful in interpersonal exchanges. Just as some of us are gifted musicians and others of us are tone deaf, some of us are interpersonally graceful while others of us are all "knees and elbows." So, her existing interpersonal skills set and her desire to change will heavily influence how much she can improve.

Clearly, individual differences shape and affect our interpersonal interactions. Often, those differences are the basis for asking (or not asking) and answering (or not answering) the question, "Do you see me the same way I see myself?" Let's be clear: This is a difficult question to ask and a difficult question to answer. That is true whether you are asking it of yourself or someone else. It is, by the way, the crux of the matter with regard to your colleague and her apparent unwillingness to look at herself through your eyes.

Because we tend to be so concerned with "face saving," we often interact with others in such a way that we do whatever we can to maintain our own self-image and help others to do the same. That means that we have a hard time letting others know what we really think about them. And we have a hard time opening up and soliciting candid feedback from those around us. So, we go about our business, engage in a lot of role-playing and pretend that everything is just fine. Meanwhile, tensions run high and camaraderie erodes.

One way this dynamic can be represented is through an information-processing model called the Johari Window. It consists of a 2x2 grid (i.e., a window) in which four regions are present. Whether information about a person is known or unknown to him/her and others determines the regions.

Here is a brief summary of each region of the Johari Window:

- **Arena** – This region contains information that is known to both you and others.
- **Facade** – This region contains elements you know about but that you hide from others.

- **Blind Spot** – This region contains all of those factors that others see in you but that you do not see in yourself.
- **Unknown** – This region contains those elements that neither you nor others see in you.

The Johari Window gives us a framework for evaluating the way that we posture toward others. Ideally, the gap between our public and private faces is very small. In the context of the model, that means that the Arena is large. But, to have a large Arena, we must trust ourselves as well as others. We must be attentive to our Blind Spots and to our Facades. When we do so, we operate with greater authenticity, sincerity and genuineness. We accept ourselves for who we really are. And, we accept others for who they really are.

Trust is foundational to expanding the Arena. To let others see who we really are, we must be at peace with ourselves. We must have confidence that in opening up and sharing, we will not be rejected or hurt. For many of us, after a lifetime of unsatisfying and frustrating work and social relationships, the ability to trust is low. In that sense, if we are going to trust, we must be willing to take a chance by opening up, to ourselves and to others.

In order to encourage your colleague to take a look at herself, she will need to work on becoming more self-aware. Self-awareness is one of the hallmarks of emotional intelligence. It means being comfortable in sharing with others (i.e., examining the Façade) and having others share with us (i.e., inviting feedback about Blind Spots). In order to help your colleague to become more self-aware, you will want to make it safe for her to do so. Perhaps you can encourage this by taking the target off of her and putting it on all of you in the work unit.

There are a number of ways to do this. You may want to take another crack at a one-on-one discussion with her. This time,

selectively disclose some of your weaknesses (i.e., share your Façade) in order to minimize the extent to which you appear to be attacking. Then, encourage your colleague to do the same. Try to develop a better understanding of the way you see each other. Clarify expectations for future interactions.

Additionally, you may want to look into the use of a team survey or 360-degree survey. By using some formal instrumentation, you structure the nature of the feedback and also involve the rest of the team. This builds a sense of, “We’re doing this together.”

Further, you may want to do some team building, perhaps exploring something “outside the box” like a ropes and challenges experience. Again, the thinking behind this approach is to build feelings of esprit de corps - “We all have strengths and weaknesses. We are here to support each another.”

In the final analysis, if your colleague is going to change her ways, she will have to learn to trust herself and the rest of her colleagues. Your task, therefore, will be to do what you can to build a safe environment that allows her to look at herself more objectively. Safety and trust will help her to share her feelings with you. And, over time, safety and trust will help her to be more open and receptive in listening to what each of you has to say.



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