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# Can You Truly Trust an Office Friend?

## When to share and when to shy away \_ a guide to getting along with your workplace pals

By Margery D. Rosen



a doctor and patient consultation

Marcin Balcerzak

When Pamela\* was planning her double mastectomy, privacy was paramount. The 41-year-old insurance broker from Chicago didn't have breast cancer, but she'd already lost her mother and her older sister to the disease, and she was determined to protect herself. To keep the surgery a secret at work, she scheduled it during her vacation and confided in only one person from the office: Lisa,\* her closest friend since Pamela had joined the company five years earlier. "Lisa and I were like family," explains Pamela. "I was positive I could count on her not to tell anyone where I really was."

But on the day Pamela came home from the hospital, there, waiting for her, was a get-well bouquet \_ from her boss. She knew immediately who had told him. And she was plenty upset. The breach of confidence, coming as it did when she was feeling particularly fragile, was hard to forgive. "Lisa apologized," Pamela says, "but even so, I felt betrayed." The two still work in the same office and are cordial to each other, but the days of long lunchtime chats and shared secrets are gone.

Pamela made a common mistake: She assumed that a work pal would behave in the same way as a close, caring friend from outside the office. After all, when someone is such a big part of your day \_ as a coworker is \_ it's hard to think otherwise. But that feeling of camaraderie can be deceptive. An on-the-job friendship can make life more pleasant, perhaps even help you get ahead. But it can also put you in jeopardy. Friendships at work can be land mines that explode when you're least prepared.

Conventional wisdom has it that business and pleasure don't mix. But with many of us forced to spend more time at work than ever before, the office may be the only opportunity for face time with a friend. Time-crunched working moms often put visits with old buddies at the bottom of their to-do list. And so it's your pal across the hall who listens when you moan

about your daughter's messy room or your hassles with your mother-in-law. What's more, many employers encourage workplace bonding with off-site retreats, parties, softball games, and Secret Santa gift exchanges.

"Workstations are the new backyard fences," says Dianne L. Blomberg, Ph.D., an associate professor of communications at Metropolitan State College of Denver and an expert on work relationships. According to research by the Gallup Organization, having a best friend at work is among the 12 key factors that make workers more productive.

Some of us get extra value from an office friend who is able to provide a new perspective. "Jackie\* was several years younger than me, and we really had very little in common," recalls Cindy,\* a marketing manager for a small legal publisher in Boston, and the mother of two children, 12 and 15. "She was single; I had kids. She was from a small town; I'm a big-city girl. She worried about finding an apartment; I worried about play dates. But she was smart, funny, and a terrific listener. And because her life was so different, she could be totally impartial. I could rant about something outrageous that a mother at school did, and she would tell me if I was overreacting. She was a very big part of my day."

*\*Names and some details have been changed to protect privacy.*



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### **When boundaries blur**

So where's the danger? In the conflicting demands of friendship and work. Let's face it: Money, power, and competition have a funny way of distorting relationships.

I still remember how shocked and humiliated I felt at my first job out of college when a woman I considered to be a close friend told our boss, verbatim, all the terrible things I had said about him during one of our gripe sessions. Foolishly, I failed to realize I was feeding ammunition to someone who definitely didn't have my best interests at heart.

As strained as relations were with my boss for a time, I held on to that job. Things got even stickier for Lainie Friedman, who works in public relations in New York City. "I became really friendly with a woman who had been hired a year after me," Lainie says. "She was desperate for a raise but didn't know how to stand up for herself. When she told me how little she was making, I was shocked. As we became closer, I told her my salary to give her the confidence to be more assertive about hers. She swore she wouldn't say a thing, but during an emotional session with her boss, she blurted out my salary!

"My friend felt terrible about her slip, but the damage was done. I'm now working for another corporation," says Lainie, "and when it comes to salary, my lips are forever sealed. No one knows what I earn but my boss and me."

Some friendships fall apart not because of confidences breached but because of how hard it is to boss around a buddy. "I met Louise\* when we both started in entry-level jobs, and we became incredibly close," recalls Marcia St. Sauveur, a dental staff assistant in Thornton, Colorado. "We gossiped and griped about our husbands, our children, our jobs \_ all the stuff girlfriends talk about. But when I was promoted, with a raise, and actually had to tell her what to do, things got very tense." Marcia wanted her friend to share in her happiness over the promotion \_ and it wasn't happening. "She seemed jealous, sometimes even petty. I felt she was taking advantage of our friendship by dragging her feet on projects. She thought I was coming down on her way too hard because we were friends. The day she accused me of being a drill sergeant in front of the whole office, I knew we had to talk."

After several frank chats, Marcia and Louise were able to get their friendship back on track \_ but something was lost forever. "We still go for walks, and we talk about lots of things, but never, ever about work," Marcia says. "We're much more guarded now."

Power and money aren't the only triggers for an office confrontation, as Lara,\* a former reporter at a Midwestern newspaper, discovered. "I became very good friends with a woman at my last job," she says. "When a new guy started in the sports department, we both agreed he was really cute, but we were too shy to do anything about it." One day, Lara found herself working on a late-breaking story at the same time as the new recruit. They started talking, and a week later they were dating. "Everyone else at the paper was thrilled for us, but my 'friend' refused to speak to me for months. Even when she did, it was incredibly awkward," Lara recalls. "Her attitude seemed so junior high school to me, but nothing I said to try to repair the friendship made a difference." Lara and the new guy eventually married, and she left the newspaper. "Four years later, I rarely see her, and when I do, it is still very strange," Lara says.



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### **Blueprint for Buddies**

For many women \_ myself included \_ it takes being burned to realize you need to build a few fences. The following tips can help you enjoy your office friendships \_ and at the same time look out for yourself.

**Take it slow.** "A trusted friend isn't found overnight, inside or outside the office," says psychologist Melanie A. Katzman, Ph.D., a clinical associate professor at Cornell Weil Medical School in New York City. Even if you and an officemate click instantly, you should test the waters by sharing only innocuous information until you're absolutely certain she's trustworthy. What can you safely tell a new and untried friend? Joyous news about an upcoming wedding, a pregnancy, or a graduation is fine. So, too, are those humorous we're-all-in-this-together stories, as long as they aren't too personal or potentially embarrassing.

**Be strategic about what you reveal.** While it may feel good to sound off at large about company policy or share how much sleep you're losing over problems with your son, revealing too much could come back to haunt you. At the office, image is crucial, and you

need to convey a positive, can-do attitude. Moan too loudly about stress overload, and you may find yourself passed over for a plum project.

**Know your territory.** Every office has its own personality. If yours is formal, keep your private life strictly under wraps. If the atmosphere is one big happy family, it may be appropriate to share details of your husband's knee operation. Some things, however, are always off-limits: gossip about whose marriage is on the rocks, who is drinking too much, or who is using office time to shop online; your own marital problems; and any rumors that fall in the category of Things I Wouldn't Want Someone to Say About Me.

**Learn how to handle conflict.** Sometimes a work friend can feel more like an adversary than an ally. But addressing problems immediately and airing your feelings honestly can curb conflict. It's best to keep your tone nonconfrontational and to be prepared with specific examples: "I noticed there was a meeting to discuss changes in the curriculum, and I wasn't on the list. I would really love to be part of that discussion."

**Don't limit yourself.** If the people in your office pod are your only friends and you're laid off, transferred, or you opt for a new job, you may find yourself downsized out of the emotional support you've relied on. So, if you can, nurture friendships outside the workplace \_ and outside your immediate office. For example, try to make time for companywide events or join organizations where you can connect with other people in your field.

**Accept an expiration date.** Experts note that few office friendships last more than two years after one or both people move on. Knowing this may happen can help you feel less abandoned. "Office friendships are often situational," says Blomberg. "They're not unlike the friendships you make when you're a new mom bonding with other women at the playground. Maybe you're still friends while the kids are in nursery school, but as the children get older, you drift apart." That doesn't mean the friendship wasn't a true one. It's just the way it is.

Of course, for a lucky few, an office friendship outlasts the place where it was nourished. "We genuinely liked each other," explains Holly Jacobs, an executive vice president at Buena Vista Production in Los Angeles, of her ten-years-and-counting friendships with two women she met at one of her first jobs.

"That connection we made transcended work," Holly says. "Just yesterday, I got a call from my friend Amy, who lives in New York City now, suggesting a wonderful book she'd read and thought I'd love. We may not speak for months at a time, but I know if I pick up the phone, it will seem as if we saw each other yesterday. You don't find friends like that every day \_ and when you do, you know they're a gift."

Don't share secrets too soon. "A trusted friend isn't found overnight, inside or outside the office," says one expert.

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