

Your Personal Coach

By
Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

Two years ago, I started a small business with my best friend Wendy. We worked together for almost a year and a half then I took six months off because of a difficult pregnancy. Even though I was sick a lot of the time, I continued to talk with Wendy and we made decisions about the business together. I was expecting to be a full partner in our business again but Wendy says she doesn't need me now. She claims that the business belongs entirely to her. This is not fair – the business is finally starting to make money. It's also not what we agreed to before I took time off. I'm angry and sad. What can I do?

-- Sadie

Dear Sadie,

You don't mention whether you and Wendy have a written agreement about the ownership of the business, and what effect taking time off – even with legitimate medical reasons – would have on ownership.

If you do have such a contract, it seems that your rights would be clarified by that document. The advantage of written contracts is that they usually -- though not always -- spell things out clearly.

There's an old adage that, "Verbal contracts aren't worth the paper they're printed on!" because they are often less clear than their written counterparts.

Perhaps, it would be of benefit to sit down with Wendy and an objective third party, like a professional mediator, to see if you are misunderstanding each other or in entirely contrary positions.

Your friendship and business partnership may be rescued if you can understand each other's positions and find compromises.

However, if honest conversation with the help of a mediator doesn't solve the problem between you, I advise you to contact a competent attorney. It is my understanding that verbal agreements can be enforced in many states. I'm not a lawyer, and I won't give you advice on this part of your question.

Your situation has legal aspects, best handled by a lawyer, but it also has a strong emotional aspect, which is understandable considering that Wendy has been your best friend.

I can't think of anything harder to deal with than betrayal; it violates our basic sense of trust in another person.

To be sure, we see betrayal all around us, from Catholic priests who sexually abuse young children, to Presidents who lie, to senior executives who enthusiastically convince employees that the corporate ship is sailing smoothly while they are lowering themselves and their big bonuses into the nearest lifeboat.

But no matter how often we may see the ragged edges of untrustworthiness from a distance, it doesn't prepare us for the personal loss we feel when a friend turns the tables on us.

Sadie, allow yourself to feel angry and sad. Those are very appropriate emotional reactions to the situation you've described. You may benefit from talking to a counselor about your feelings. I advise it especially if you find that you aren't healing as time goes by.

It may also feel "appropriate" to stop trusting other people — why trust anyone? — when we have been betrayed. But if you do so, you would lose more than a business and a friendship.

While some people are indeed untrustworthy, most people are worthy of trust. At least that's my worldview. Perhaps the secret lies in being able to make good discriminations about whom we should trust and whom we should not.

Animals are so much easier to read than people. Would you reach out to pet a snarling dog with hackles raised, and teeth flashing? I hope not, because that dog is giving you a very clear message, "Back off!" On the other hand, you would probably want to pet a puppy with a wagging tail and a sweet expression.

It's too bad that human beings don't always give off the same unambiguous signals.

So we have to be mindful and aware of who deserves our trust. I don't know whether Wendy gave you any warning signals that she was not trustworthy, but it might help to reflect on whether there were any red flags that you ignored. The purpose is not to berate yourself, but to learn as much as you can from this experience.

Here are some things that you might look for in the future: Trustworthy people are honest, keep their word, do what they say, show loyalty, and represent themselves fairly and consistently. Trustworthy people maintain high standards of ethics in their beliefs and behavior. If a friend of mine was dishonest with someone else, I expect that he or she might also be dishonest with me at some point.

Don't let this unfortunate and painful experience destroy your ability to trust others. Don't let it become a reason to betray others in the future. That's an attitude of, "It happened to me, everybody does this to other people so I might as well, too." That's not true.

I have found that there are many more trustworthy and fair people in the world than there are people who will betray us. The English Essayist Samuel Johnson wrote, "It is better to suffer wrong than to do it, and happier to be sometimes cheated than not to trust."

I think he had the right perspective.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com, call 473-4004, or direct questions to the Outer Banks Sentinel, P.O. Box 546, Nags Head, NC 27949

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D. is a personal coach, motivational speaker, clinical psychologist and author of “After the Darkest Hour” and other nonfiction books. She lives in Manteo. To learn more about personal coaching, visit her website at www.fullpotentialliving.com.

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