

Nanny Diaries: Lessons for the Small Business Owner

By Cathy Goodwin

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Nanny Diaries has achieved the dazzling height of Number One in book sales on amazon.com. The authors serve up delicious pseudo-gossipy scenes of a dysfunctional Park Avenue family, "Mr. and Mrs. X."

From the perspective of a career coach, Nanny is an independent contractor -- a very small business owner -- who needs to understand her own role.

1. As the supplier of a service, Nanny should establish boundaries and enforce their agreement. After the first meeting, she can write a nice letter to Mrs. X summarizing her understanding of the job. Those who balk at written agreements are signalling an unwillingness to enter a business relationship.
2. The first time Mrs. X asks Nanny to "stay a few extra minutes to fix a snack" for four-year-old Grayer, Nanny must respond, "No. We agreed I would leave at three." A reason, such as "I have a class at four," leaves an opening for Mrs. X to respond, "Well, you can still make it if you take a cab."
3. Nanny gets paid in cash, off the books. There's a hidden price: she can't enforce her agreement. After two hellish weeks at a New England vacation cottage, her check -- for ten sixteen-hour days -- is only five hundred dollars. She'd do better to pay taxes and get what's coming to her.
4. Nanny allows her emotions to override her business relationship. She stays because "Grayer needs me." She worries that Mrs. X will find the lingerie that Mr. X's lover has left in the apartment. Don't even go there.
5. Nanny needs a plan for emergencies when the client has needs she can't fill. When her tour of duty ends before Mrs. X returns, she can leave Grover with the family housekeeper or drop him off at a day care center. Staying late is not an option.
6. Nanny should be guided her own intuition. She wonders why she is replacing Caitlin, Grayer's competent nanny. She realizes her Christmas "bonus" sends a strong message. Although her family and friends shrug off these episodes, Nanny would be wise to confront what she fears.
7. For any workable arrangement, Nanny must be ready to turn down business. An overly-demanding client who doesn't pay on time should signal "Walk!" like a flashing neon sign. Every business owner needs back-up jobs and a stash of cash. In my experience, being free to

walk means you usually don't have to.

Ironically, Mrs. X turns to a "consultant" who sounds suspiciously like a life coach to help her stand firm as she deals with her household help.

"Nanny" gets some excellent one-shot advice from her parents, but she lacks a broader understanding of business relationships. She'd do better to ask for a gift certificate for some coaching. She has plenty of options. It's probably too late to make this job work but next time she can set the ground rules, whether she's a nanny or an entry-level professional.

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