



## (U) An Interview with Zelda

FROM: SIDtoday  
Run Date: 05/05/2011

(U) With the first anniversary of the "Ask Zelda" column looming on the horizon (in June), we decided to interview Zelda herself. We thought her readers might be interested in learning more about the advice-giver...

**(U) SIDtoday: Zelda, your advice column "Ask Zelda" has been the most successful non-technical series in the history of SIDtoday. A lot of people have questioned whether Zelda is a real person or a team of people, and why she uses a pen name.**

(U) Zelda: Well, as you can see, I'm a real person. In the first issue you published my "credentials," and that description was accurate; but the picture that runs with the column [above] looks nothing like me. As for Zelda being a team of people, I do occasionally consult with another person for a "sanity check," but I am the sole author of the column.

(U) The decision to use a pen name came about for several reasons. The idea for the column was proposed by the SIDtoday editor, who was looking for a venue where SID supervisors could write in to ask advice. Since SIDtoday is like an online newspaper, we decided to follow the tradition of newspaper write-in advice columnists (such as Dear Abby and Miss Manners) and give me a nom de plume. I like it because using a pen name creates a persona who's more memorable and accessible than "Ask Mary Smith, Chief of S456." Plus it creates a certain mystique about Zelda... she's bigger than life. It also prevents me from getting inundated with hate mail and requests for advice outside of the column. *[Ed. note: Some people have asked for Zelda's direct help with a personal problem but didn't want it published in SIDtoday.]*

**(U) ST: You said it was an advice column for supervisors...**

(U) Z: Yes -- that was the original plan. But non-supervisory employees began writing in asking questions and requesting someone like Zelda help them with their issues, too.

**(U) ST: So you branched out to answer anything work related?**

(U) Z: [laughs] More or less! I don't give technical or romantic advice, however.

**(U) ST: What has been the reaction to Zelda?**

(U) Z: I'm very pleased-- and surprised -- that it has been overwhelmingly positive. Each month it is among the top 5 most widely read articles, and I want to thank my loyal followers for that. I'm thinking of making little rubber bracelets that say WWZD ("What Would Zelda Do?") to give out at Front Line Leader classes. Or maybe t-shirts that say "Be a FOZ" ("Friend of Zelda").

**(U) ST: But it hasn't all been positive...**

(U//FOUO) Z: Heavens, no. There have been a few people who didn't appreciate Zelda's sense of humor, and at first some of the other NSA organizations (like HR and ADCL) were uncomfortable with

an unknown person in SID dispensing advice in their areas of expertise. But we made it clear that this was just Zelda's opinion and not an official answer. Strict policy questions can and should be addressed by these other organizations, but Zelda fills a void for people who are seeking advice. She acts as a wise friend or senior co-worker -- which isn't the same thing as asking for a policy interpretation. And many areas of interpersonal relations can't be addressed by policy. I don't believe there's a policy on how to deal with an obnoxious or smelly coworker, for example. Besides, I think people would rather read something with a bit of a personality (Zelda has been called "cheeky" -- even opinionated) as opposed to a bland, whitewashed party line that reads like a policy manual and has been approved by a chain of managers to scrub it of anything that might offend. Zelda is not afraid to offend -- although that's not her intent.

**(U) ST: Some readers are probably wondering if the questions are really sent in by your readers, or if you make them up.**

(U) Z: They were all from readers except for the very first one -- I had to "prime the pump" since no one knew about Zelda to ask questions before the first article came out. Also, in December I turned the tables on the workforce and asked them to give advice on a situation of my choosing.

**(U) ST: How do you decide which questions to answer?**

(U) Z: I try to address a variety of topics, so if you write in about a specific problem and I just answered a similar question, yours probably won't get published.... at least not for a while. Also, some questions are more appropriate for the policy expert in that area to answer. In that case, SIDtoday forwards the question (with the asker's permission) to that POC.

**(U) ST: What issues do you see people concerned about most?**

(U) Z: How to deal with their supervisor is a big one. I devoted a whole article to "managing up" because several readers had asked similar questions along those lines.

**(U) ST: Is there an underlying theme or philosophy that ties all your advice together?**

(U) Z: Hmm, if I had to pick something, I might say "common sense." Also, be nice to people and assume noble intent.

**(U) ST: What one piece of advice do you have for SID managers?**

(U) Z: Throughout my career I've seen too many micro-managers. It's probably inevitable -- we hire people for their technical skills, and then when they get to a certain level they find they need to go into management to keep getting promoted. However, they still have a secret hankering to do the technical work. Managers need to be open minded: just because the organization has always done something a certain way doesn't mean it's the only -- or even best -- way to do it. My advice to SID managers is to **take care of your people and let your people take care of the mission.**

**(U) ST: One last question: will the readers ever find out who Zelda really is?**

(U) Z: I don't know... Probably when the column wraps-up, whenever that may be. Doing it too soon might be disappointing -- like unmasking the Lone Ranger!

## **(U) Have a Supervisory Dilemma? Ask Zelda! (Topic: 'Is Bain de Soleil a Bane on NSA??')**

FROM: 'Zelda,' Dispenser of Advice for NSA Supervisors  
Run Date: 06/15/2010

(U) SIDtoday editor's note: Today we debut a brand new column: "Ask Zelda!" If you, as a supervisor, encounter a tricky problem and don't know what to do, see whether Zelda can offer a solution! Here's a little background about our columnist:

*"Zelda" is the pen name for a manager who has spent most of her 29 years at NSA in SID (and its predecessor orgs), supplemented by several years in career development (ADET). Her managerial experience includes approximately 20 years as a first-line and mid-level Agency supervisor, as well as supervisory positions in the entertainment and food service industries. Zelda develops and teaches leadership training as part of the National Cryptologic School's Adjunct Faculty, and enjoys bossing people around outside of work, too.*

Today's question (the entire text below is unclassified):

Dear Zelda,

Now that the warm weather is here, some of the newer Agency employees in my office are dressing in ways that are less than professional. How do I, as their supervisor, get them to stop dressing like they're going to the beach when NSA doesn't have a formal dress code?

Signed,  
Prudish Prudence

Dear Prudence,

Oy! Once the thermometer hits 80 degrees, it can look like Ocean City West around here. Somehow, shorts and flip-flops don't exactly convey the image of a fierce SIGINT warrior.

You are right to be concerned, and I applaud your initiative as the supervisor to take corrective action. Not only is beach attire unprofessional in the workplace, but in certain cases it can be downright distracting to co-workers (if you get my drift).

The main thing to remember when counseling the offending employees is that they probably don't know any better. For some, this may be their first real job after graduating high school or college. Your approach should be to educate, not to discipline (unless you have already "educated" them more than once and there has been no change in behavior). Hold a private counseling session as soon as possible where you explain that, while NSA has no formal dress code, they are expected to present themselves in a professional manner -- and that includes their attire. You may also want to take the opportunity to advise them on "dressing for success" so that they are taken seriously in their new career. In fact, it might be a good idea to have this talk with **all** new Agency employees, informing them of the standard level of office dress before it becomes an issue.

You, as the supervisor, are in a position to set guidelines for what is appropriate in your work center. Both the physical location and type of work being done will help you determine what these should be. If safety is a concern (like when operating dangerous equipment), impress upon them the importance of wearing steel-toed boots or long-sleeved shirts, even if they make one hot in the summer. What may be acceptable for employees working on the roof, in an overheated machine room, or crawling under floor tiles is probably not appropriate for desk job workers in an air-conditioned office. Do your employees fill a customer liaison role or one where they represent the organization to others? That may require a more formal level of dress than solitary workers who rarely interact with others.

On the other hand, you must balance your demands with the employee's physical comfort and the desire to express one's individuality. Remember that embracing diversity extends to the wardrobe, too!

So, Prudence, to summarize my advice:

- Decide what is appropriate for your work center -- and try to be inclusive.
- Inform your employees what the office dress code is and why (I find people are more likely to comply with rules if they understand the reasons behind them).
- Ask them for specific behavioral changes (ex.: they are welcome to wear sandals at work, but please refrain from wearing rubber shower thongs in the office).
- Answer any questions and address their concerns.
- Thank them for their cooperation.
- Enforce the rules equitably among your people.

As with most things, communication is the key to a happy and productive workplace. With a little proactive discussion on your part, your staff can look professional during the summer months. So the next time one of your employees looks like they work at the National Snorkeling Academy instead of the National Security Agency, try these tips and let me know how it turns out.

Note: Other supervisors who have successfully handled this problem are encouraged to share their strategies on the *SIDtoday Blog*. Also, do you have a question of your own for Zelda? Use the "comments/suggestions about this article" link (below right) to submit your question; we'll make sure it gets to Zelda.

## (U) "Ask Zelda!": Guilty Until Proven Innocent?

FROM: "Zelda," Dispenser of Advice on Workplace Issues  
Run Date: 11/08/2012

(U) The below article is unclassified in its entirety.

*Note: The following question has been edited for brevity.*

Dear Zelda,

How do I exonerate myself from an "anonymous mailbag" incident?

A few months ago, a co-worker was really steamed about how things were going in our branch/division and wrote a livid message to our office's "anonymous mailbag," but showed a few of us the draft beforehand. I suggested that the wording was overly strong, as it referred to our managers as "abysmal" and "idiotic." The co-worker sent it anyway.

Co-worker receives praise and recognition from the office, despite the mail or because co-worker didn't come up on the list of suspects who wrote the message. In the meantime, the chill I'm feeling is pretty severe! I'm known to be a direct person, so possibly it was assumed that if anyone would write a message like that, I would; but I didn't, and I advised against it.

Because I agreed to look at the draft in confidence, I don't want to dime out my co-worker. What recourse do I have to officially establish that I have not used this mailbag? If I have something to say to anyone, I'll do it under my own name, and it won't involve using the words "abysmal" or "idiotic."

Help!!!!

And BTW, to me the situation I'm in is a good argument against "anonymous mailbags." Let people put their own names to criticisms they want to make of others. Otherwise, you end up with people like me who are wondering if we're getting unjustly blamed.

– Innocent Bystander

Dear Bystander,

You make a good case against anonymous mailbags, but a lot of people won't give feedback at all if they know it will be attributed to them. I believe scathing comments such as your co-worker's are the exception and not the rule in such mailbags.

Nevertheless, there is something you can do about the situation. Speak to the person(s) who is freezing you out. In private say, "I've noticed you . . . [describe the treatment you're receiving]. Have I done something to offend you?"

If they mention "your" note, you have the opening to set the record straight. You can state what you did above -- that you have never used the mailbag and that if you had something to say to someone, you

would tell them directly 'cause that's how you roll.

If they don't bring up the note, at least you've made an attempt to clear the air. Maybe there is another reason for the cold shoulder. When they insist nothing is wrong, you could say something like, "I hope if you did have a problem with me, that you would talk to me directly about it. I would do the same for you." That plants the seeds of innocence in their mind (i.e., you would talk to them directly and not use an anonymous mailbag) if the cause is the note, and encourages them to broach the subject if it's something else.

### **Other "Anonymous Mailbag" Thoughts**

While it is tempting to be completely uncensored when using anonymous feedback mechanisms, please understand that it can be counterproductive. A rude, accusatory, or overly severe comment can turn the recipient off to your suggestion for improvement. Try to make your comment constructive and free from emotional coloring. You are more likely to have it considered and initiate change that way.

Likewise, if you receive hostile feedback through an anonymous mailbag, it's easy to discount and ignore it, especially if it pushes your "hot" buttons. Instead, try to look past the way it is worded to see if there's a kernel of truth that requires action. Often important feedback is not couched in the most pleasant terms. While many people will accept gentle criticism from a friend, it takes a truly enlightened person to acknowledge that an adversary's nasty comment might have some merit and to do something about it.

(U) Standard disclaimer: Zelda's views are her own and do not represent the official views of the Associate Directorate for Corporate Leadership, Human Resources, SID, or any other NSA organization.

(U) Looking for some of the older "Ask Zelda" columns? They are filed away in the archives under the "Ask Zelda! 2010" and "Ask Zelda 2011" series. Also, if you'd like to submit a question of your own to Zelda, just use the "comments/suggestions about this article" button below to send it in.

## **(U) "Ask Zelda!": Watching Every Word in Snitch City**

FROM: "Zelda," Dispenser of Advice for SIGINTers on Workplace Issues  
Run Date: 09/09/2011

(U) Note: The question has been edited for brevity's sake. The below column is unclassified in its entirety.

Dear Zelda,

Here's the scenario: when the boss sees co-workers having a quiet conversation, he wants to know what is being said (it's mostly work related). He has his designated "snitches" and expects them to keep him apprised of all the office gossip -- even calling them at home and expecting a run-down! This puts the "designees" in a really awkward position; plus, we're all afraid any offhand comment or anything said in confidence might be either repeated or misrepresented.

Needless to say, this creates a certain amount of tension between team members who normally would get along well, and adds stress in an already stressful atmosphere. There is also an unspoken belief that he will move people to different desks to break up what he perceives as people becoming too "chummy." (It's been done under the guise of "creating teams.")

We used to be able to joke around a little or talk about our favorite "Idol" contestant to break the tension, but now we're getting more and more skittish about even the most mundane general conversations ("Did you have a good weekend?"). This was once a very open, cooperative group who worked well together. Now we're more suspicious of each other and teamwork is becoming harder. Do you think this was the goal?

Silenced in SID

Dear Silenced,

Wow, that takes "intelligence collection" in a whole new -- and inappropriate -- direction!

### **It's lonely at the top**

First let me say that I do not think this manager's intent is to discourage teamwork. What it sounds like to me is that he (I'll call him "Michael") feels like an outsider and wants to be in the know. It can be lonely being the boss. You sit closed off in an office and miss the easy camaraderie with your co-workers, while at the same time feeling the need to "police" their behavior. Maybe someone told Michael there was too much chit-chat in his organization or that some specific problem existed, and resorting to snitches is his misguided way of ferreting out the culprit(s). Either that or he's been watching too much "Law and Order."

Why don't you try this: go overboard communicating with him. Call him over when he's wandering around spying on people and fill him in on things. Give him details of work projects and ask his opinion about mission matters so he feels like he's "in the loop." Get others to drop by his desk periodically just to say hello, "hope you had a good weekend," or "How 'bout them O's?" I bet that will

satisfy his need to know what's going on and he'll back off with the nosiness.

### **NSA=No Secrets Allowed**

We work in an Agency of secrets, but this kind of secrecy begets more secrecy and it becomes a downward spiral that destroys teamwork. What if you put an end to all the secrecy by bringing it out into the open? You and your co-workers could ask Michael for a team meeting and lay out the issue as you see it: "We feel like you don't trust us and we aren't comfortable making small talk anymore for fear of having our desks moved if we're seen as being too chummy." (Leave out the part about the snitches.) Tell him how this is hampering collaboration and affecting the work, ask him if he has a problem with the team's behavior, and see what he says. Encourage him to come directly to the employee in question if he has a concern (rather than ask a third party to gather intel for him). In any case, the meeting will clear the air. Stick to the facts and how you feel, rather than making it about him ("We're uncomfortable" vs. "You're spying on us").

If, after your attempts to bring things out in the open, it becomes clear that Michael is simply evil (some people live to stir up trouble), your best recourse may be to approach Michael's boss with the problem and perhaps Michael can be reassigned. Be sure to focus on the effect it's having on the team's work when you talk to his manager.

### **No one likes a tattle-tale**

"Silenced" implied that in this situation the snitches were unwilling accomplices for Michael. The reluctant snitches feel like they're "damned if they do and damned if they don't," and everyone else is walking on eggshells. If you are bothered by snitches in your office, whether of the unwilling or voluntary variety, the best solution is to keep your behavior above reproach. Be a good performer, watch what you say and do, lock your screen when you step away from your workstation, and keep fodder for wagging tongues (your Viagra stash, photos of your wild-and-crazy girls' weekend in Atlantic City) at home or out of sight. If you are put in the "unwilling snitch" position, I would advise telling your boss that you're not comfortable with the role and to please not ask that of you.

Trust is hard to rebuild once it has been broken. Your work center may take time to heal after this deplorable practice is discontinued, but give it time and hopefully the open cooperation you once enjoyed will return.

zelda

(U//FOUO) Editor's note: Have thoughts on this topic? Post them on the associated Tapioca Pebble.

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