

A QUESTION of LEADERSHIP

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It's not uncommon for executives to avoid friendships with co-workers. They often fear that having personal relationships in the workplace might compromise their ability to make tough decisions. That's a legitimate concern, but handled properly, workplace friendships can be positive and can offer a range of benefits for an executive.

For one thing, people who know an executive well and whom the executive trusts can be a source of feedback that provides perspective, relieves stress, and even contributes to better decisions.

But to realize the benefits of workplace friendships, executives must be aware of two things: the types of friendships that are possible in the workplace and how to manage these friendships.

There are three types of workplace friendships. The first is primarily social—the executive participates in various social and recreational activities with co-workers, and although work might be discussed during these activities, the executive doesn't rely on the co-workers for job success, and vice versa.

The second type of friendship is primarily practical—it's focused on

work. It may include conversations about things apart from work, but the relationship is mainly in the context of work. This type of friendship is typically based not so much on affection as on mutual respect.

In the third type of friendship, which can grow out of either of the first two, work is not the primary

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connection. The workplace is where the friendship first forms, but most of the interests that continue to bond the friends are not work related. Even when the friends no longer have a common workplace, their friendship remains.

Such relationships are based on trust and the assurance that neither person will harm the other, even if the relationship becomes stressed.

I believe executives should have all three types of friendships, but they need to manage them effectively.

Good management starts with knowing that there are boundaries. Executives need to be sensitive to the roles and responsibilities of each person in the friendship and know how to keep the personal and professional aspects of the relationship distinct. Here are some ways that executives can maintain boundaries in workplace friendships:

- Don't allow socializing at the office to interfere with work; hold highly personal conversations outside the workplace.
- Never show favoritism toward the friend in promotions, raises, or perks; avoid accepting favors from the friend.
- Remain aware of when you're acting as a friend and when you're acting as a colleague.
- Never ask the friend for information that could compromise the friend's integrity.
- Occasionally check in with the friend to assess your and his or her mutual comfort with the friendship and the issues related to it.
- Don't mix personal and professional content in a single voice mail or e-mail; leave separate messages.

A lot has been said and written recently about the importance of emotional intelligence at work. This leads to one of the best arguments in favor of having friendships at work, because one good way to develop emotional intelligence is through friends, who may be your best conduit for understanding and learning from your work experience.

Should executives have friends at work?

CYNTHIA MCCAULEY

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This is a difficult question to answer definitively because there is no real consensus in management and leadership literature or among executives themselves on whether there should or should not be a hard and fast distinction between personal and professional relationships.

Some executives believe that having the positively reinforcing relationship that comes with friendship is the best way to develop a working rapport with a colleague and that working with friends adds a whole new dimension of loyalty, commitment, purpose, performance, productivity, and communication. Other executives believe that a clear line should be drawn that prevents engaging in any activities with colleagues that are not related to work. Their reasoning is generally that mixing personal and professional relationships opens up the possibility of favoritism, ethical lapses, sexual misconduct, improper influences on tough business and job performance decisions, and other problems.

Friendships occur naturally and spontaneously (Muhammad Ali once observed that "friendship is the hardest thing in the world to explain; it's not

something that you learn in school"), so the question should perhaps be rephrased as "Should executives *resist* having friends at work?" Indeed, some organizations have official policies against fraternizing, but an edict discouraging personal relationships at work isn't likely to stop them entirely. In fact, it would probably just make the employees angry with management and hurt their morale.

The concerns of executives who are opposed to having friends at work

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are well founded, but the benefits of such personal relationships are many and strong. Knowing and acting in accord with what is important to co-workers in terms of their personal goals, interests, and families is an effective way to ensure that they will give their best at work. Workplace friendships also provide a sounding board and are a valuable source of emotional support, feedback on performance, information sharing, and work-related satisfaction resulting from the approval of friends. Some research has recently weighed in showing the favorable effects of

friendships at work: a study of four hundred companies by the Gallup Organization found that workers' ability to form friendships at work is among the most powerful of twelve indicators of highly productive workplaces. Finally, it's important to remember that many people spend more of their waking hours with co-workers than with anyone else in their lives, so having an impersonal workplace is hardly the way to bring out the best in them.

Close personal relationships at work are not what cause the problems; the problems arise from the way the relationships are managed. Management is key, and good management begins with being able to separate personal from business issues. Executives should understand that they can be friends with people and still make tough but fair decisions about those people's assignments, job performance, promotions and raises, and other issues. Having established, clear measures of performance and accountability is crucial to this ability. When tasks and goals are spelled out, results are tracked, feedback on performance is regular, and positive reinforcement is frequent, professional and personal relationships can flourish together.

One final note: although the benefits of properly managed workplace friendships are clear, such relationships have one thing that is increasingly working against them. The rapid rates of employee transfers, turnover, and corporate reorganizations have made it difficult to sustain workplace friendships for long.

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