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Workplace friendships: the double-edged sword

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Having friends at work can be good for employees and businesses alike. It fosters a sense of belonging, reduces turnover intention, and increases creativity and innovation, all good for performance. However, workplace friendships come with downsides too, including rumours, sexual harassment, nepotism, and favouritism. **Odessa S Hamilton, Jasmine Virhia,** *and* **Teresa Almeida** *recommend seven practices to ensure that friendships are equitably beneficial among teams and do not develop into unfavourable outcomes.*

It is said that '*the most beautiful relationship in the world is friendship*', but it is less clear whether friendships can exist at work without compromising professional integrity. Workplace friendships have been described as a non-exclusive, spontaneous relationship founded on shared interest, aligned values, mutual trust, commitment, and enjoyment (Berman et al., 2002). A relational forum, with socioemotional and instrumental function, that presents an informal, intimate, and voluntary connection between employees (Dobel, 2001).

The pro-camp

The advantages to workplace friendships that engender positive interpersonal interactions are many and diverse. They can be instrumental to supportive working environments (Chen et al., 2013) and can develop a sense of belonging, encouraging sentiments of trust and support (Berman et al., 2002). In a study of 'best friends' at work, Gallup (2008) found that friendships can have demonstrable, beneficial effects on businesses. Friendships were related to fewer workplace accidents and attributed to people looking out for the safety of their friends. There are several ways through which friendships facilitate greater authenticity and job satisfaction. From trust among colleagues, collaborative reciprocity, and attenuated stress. Each increase personal resources, through positive emotions, increased happiness, and psychological safety (Andrew and Montague, 1998; Carmeli et al., 2009). It comes to no surprise, therefore, that workplace friendships have been associated with creativity and innovation (Cao and Zhang, 2019). With positive impacts seen, also, on turnover intention, emotional commitment, knowledge sharing, and overall performance (Chiaburu and Harrison, 2008). As the risk and cost of unsuccessful efforts are reduced, fear is alleviated so employees are more likely to adopt bold, open, creative behaviour, which is central to the survival and sustainable development of organisations (Berman et al., 2002).

Together, these benefits at an individual and organisational level suggest that building friendships at work seems worthwhile and somewhat intuitive, as Alison Beard (2020) puts it "*given the hours and interests we share with colleagues, work should be an easy place to build these relationships*".

The against-camp

But it is not all *diamonds and pearls*, friendships at work can be problematic on a number of dimensions. Rumours, sexual harassment, nepotism, and favouritism to name a few. Grayson (2007) showed that relationships that cross over '*work and play*' can result in conflict because of incompatible expectations. While Pillemer and Rothbard (2016) found that workplace friendships can reduce organisational loyalty, commitment, and productivity. Negative impacts have received much attention, with a growing number of empirical evidence striving to make sense of this paradox (D'Cruz and Noronha, 2011; Dunbar, 2004; Methot et al., 2016). Gossip, for example, may facilitate cooperation and cohesion on one end, but it can cause division and be distancing on the other end (Duffy et al., 2002). Humour, as well, can be a way of bonding with others and strengthening the sense of organisational identity, but its impact is contingent on the boundaries set for how it is used and accepted (Plester, 2009). For example, if within an organisation negative humour styles such as teasing or sexist jokes may be used to engender stronger bonds within those in the "in-group", it can lead to a pressure to conform with a stereotypical ideal of becoming "*one of the boys*" or the risk of being assigned outsider status (Fine and De Soucey, 2005) by those who do not match this group identity. Thus, we see that workplace friendships can include some but exclude others through group homogeneity and barriers to opportunities. For instance, a recent study found that male employees who have more social interactions

with their male managers were promoted at higher rates, irrespective of actual performance or effort (Cullen & Perez-Truglia, 2019).

The social capital paradigm

When thinking about workplace friendships, consider the interrelated concept of social capital: a resource created through relationships, predicated on the location and the social relation of another that can be mobilised to facilitate action (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Coleman, 1988). In other words, how people are connected to each other, champion, and exchange information with one another can be a source of advantage (Burt, 2000). Social capital can be leveraged to secure employment, promotion, raises, and other individual rewards across one's career span (Adler & Kwon, 2002). In an influential collection of studies on social capital and networks, Granovetter (1995) showed that who you know – one's social ties – is essential to accessing information about job opportunities. Social capital can also qualify as a job resource as collaboration, helping behaviour, and shared understanding among people can translate to greater motivation and work engagement. Ultimately, social capital can facilitate better inter-unit exchange, which can lead to higher performance and innovation (Clausen et al., 2019). But this is not true for everyone as, for some, these bonds can exclude rather than include.

The threat of cronyism

Cronyism, the perceived and actual preference given by one friend to another, is a pervasive problem that can undermine social capital (Jones & Stout, 2015; Jawahar et al., 2021). Prioritising personal relationships at work and favouring people based on non-performance related factors can negatively impact the functioning of an organisation – exemplified by the US Enron scandal (Vickers et al., 2002). More specifically, cronyism is associated with unjustified prioritisation that

can negatively impact job commitment, satisfaction, and performance as unfavoured employees naturally respond to unmerited conditions. For instance, one recent healthcare study investigated organisational cronyism as a workplace stressor. Doctors and nurses who felt unfairly treated due to unfair assignment and reward allocations responded by disengaging, which led to poorer performance (Shaheen et al. 2020). Thus, through this lens, if employees feel decisions are based on closeness rather than performance, workplace friendships can mitigate the meritocratic ideal of organisations. Importantly, this perception of cronyism can have long-term impacts, in spite of organisational attempts to eliminate it, as employees may not be convinced that the culture has changed and systems have become merit-based (Pearce, 2015).

Networking versus friendship

If friendships are detrimental, then what of networking? At face value they may seem the same, and there is a conceptual overlap, but the intent behind them is fundamentally different. Friendships are primarily vested in social gain, so tend to be more centrally focused on interpersonal benefits, including well-being, social interests, and shared values. By inference, people within friendships become less motivated by instrumental concerns, such as money, power, influence, and status (Grayson, 2007). Networks, by contrast, are more centrally focused on developing and maintaining relationships that can aid the achievement of specific professional goals (Forret & Dougherty, 2004). Of course, people may organically develop friendships while networking, but it is not the primary motive (Grayson, 2007). The purpose of networking is a clear and mutually agreed upon interaction, principally directed by career advancement efforts. It is transactional and, importantly, it is an endeavour that is available to all. Therefore, it is more objective than friendship, which is more heavily weighted on likeability.

The art of boundaries

The juxtaposition that workplace friendships create between positive and negative outcomes calls for an exploration into boundaries. It raises the question, how can people optimally approach friendships at the individual, group, and organisational level? According to Lee and Jablin (1995), there are four primary avenues to maintain friendships at work, while ensuring that boundaries are not blurred. *Avoidance of interaction*, which is the intentional attempt to avoid contact and communication with the friend while at work. *Indirect conversational refocus*, which is the deliberate, but indirect, redressing of a conversation from personal themes toward work-related themes. *Direct conversational refocus*, which is the explicit, and direct, refocusing a conversation toward work-related issues. Saying, for instance, that one wants to keep it professional and work-centred. *Openness*, which is having direct and explicit discussions about the dynamics that can threaten the friendship, and infringe on professionalism, along with limits that need to be put in place.

Ultimately, we do not advocate for an all or nothing strategy for friendships at work. We recommend seven simple practices to ensure that workplace friendships are equitably beneficial among teams, and do not develop into unfavourable outcomes at the individual or group level.

1. **Discuss friendships boundaries openly.** Friendships can be beneficial when they are not held in silos and when everyone understands the pros and cons.

2. **Look out for exclusionary behaviours.** Consider members of your team who are not often called upon, asked to engage, or invited to social events. Be an entry point to the ingroup so that all can benefit.

3. **Consider what is fuelling friendships.** Friendships should foster sentiments of elation and security that translate to positive work experiences. Negativity, by contrast, can be a poison – to the friendship and the organisation more broadly, leading to diminished engagement, commitment, performance, and creativity. Plus, it is a major contributor to turnover! Be careful to avoid bonding solely on negative experiences.

4. **Own your authenticity.** Granted, this is easier said than done. But you should not have to change who you are, share more than you feel comfortable, nor compromise on values to cultivate artificial friendships at work.

5. **Do not expect to "click" with everyone at work.** There really is no requirement to be friends with *everyone* at work. Being friendly is not tantamount to being friends. It is also acceptable for different relationships to have different boundaries.

6. **Be aware of team dynamics.** You may be friends with people that are not friends with each other, so things said to you in confidence should remain with you. Avoid gossip like the plague it is!

7. **Be mindful of the "*boss-friend*" gap.** It is especially important for managers to ensure that friendships do not lead to favouritism and biased decision-making. This requires a candid approach to 'work-play' boundaries, ensuring that benefits are conferred equitably among the team. For example, invite the entire team to lunch – no exclusions – as opposed to just those you're friendly with. Doing so not only ensures fairness, but it can lead to the formation of constructive friendships between colleagues (Laker, et al., 2020).

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