

SHOULD YOU HAVE FRIENDS AT WORK?



The case for and against mixing work and friendship.

It seemed like a scene from a bad soap opera. A co-worker slyly leaned my way during a conference reception, giving me the goods on my director's chief confidante. "She likes you and she's the director's best friend," he said. "If you're smart, you'll make and keep her as a friend." It's important to be an innovative, hardworking, and dependable team player. But anyone adept at office politics also knows that you have to create and sustain social networks in the workplace. Can certain office relationships prove detrimental to the company and your career?

People Who Need People

Consider Aristotle's viewpoint: "Society is something in nature that precedes the individual. Anyone who either cannot lead the common life, or is so self-sufficient as not to need to, and therefore does not partake of society, is either a beast or a god." The need for companionship doesn't end when we enter the workplace, although some experts believe it should.

"In general," says Brian Thomas, "off-company social time between co-workers is a good idea because it builds camaraderie, which can ultimately lead to greater success at work." Thomas studies organizational culture as a training coordinator at. "However, I do not think boss/subordinate friendships are ever healthy for the organization, although they can be rewarding when they grow out of work-related interests and are kept at work. Both parties must recognize the sorts of challenges that anything more than that could bring about."

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Defining Workplace Distance

The past several years brought many changes to the workplace: technological advances, alternative work schedules, flatter organizations, and kinder, gentler hierarchies. But each advance confuses the definition of appropriate distance in workplace relationships. Socializing with co-workers may be difficult to avoid in today's more casual, less hierarchical office.

Kathy Meister, a human resources generalist, insists that workers maintain boundaries "Unfortunately," she says, "when these relationships go bad, [people] bring the problems to work with them. We've seen all kinds of things result from friendships gone bad, discrimination and harassment lawsuits, or someone getting angry because a friend was promoted and they weren't. It's messy."

As Meister further points out, there are few guidelines to help in determining the appropriateness of an office friendship. "I don't think we do anything to define what's appropriate and what's not," she says, "except perhaps through sexual harassment laws. It is often difficult to know when too much is too much, until the whispers start and teamwork and productivity stop. By then, it's too late. The relationship between two or three people, as innocent as it may be, has already had a negative impact on the organization."

Thomas agrees, comparing the workplace friendship to a typical personal friendship. It works when it works, but when the honeymoon is over, things get ugly. "Peer-to-peer socialization is fine," he says, "but just like in any other relationship, things can go sour." And, when they do, the impact is exacerbated because the whole scene gets played out in the open – in plain view of the organization.

"What happens when you mix business with pleasure is that people can get to know each other too well. When you don't know a person so well, you focus on their strengths. You idolize them. But, the closer you get to them, the more their weaknesses show, which diminishes your opinion," according to Thomas. This changes the dynamics of the relationship and, ultimately, the dynamics of the team or the entire organization.

What's In It For Me?

If we agree with Aristotle—and classic psychologists like Abraham Maslow – we see how muddy the waters may get when we socialize with co-workers but are still willing to take the risk. Despite generally negative attitudes toward office socializing, both Thomas and Meister will admit to a few benefits of corporate camaraderie. "The boss who befriends a subordinate gets a warts-and-all look at the workplace," says Thomas, "that he may not get from just walking around."

According to Meister, "There are some pros. For the employee, it's a chance to get some informal coaching and needed support." For peers, it's simply an ear for listening to ideas and the assumption that your friend has no hidden agendas and will tell you the truth. "This can be a good thing," Meister adds.

Pros

When workplace friendships are positive, they can make the space and the work more interesting and fulfilling. They add a new facet of loyalty, commitment, and purpose to our lives. Employees seek win-win solutions to problems. The synergy is contagious. There are several statistics to encourage making friends on the job. For example when 126 people were asked this question: "Just how important are friends in helping someone get a job?" 37 percent said they got the job through someone they knew.

Albert Jones puts that percentage even higher. In an article he reported that 60 percent of 351 surveyed jobseekers found their job through friends and former colleagues.

Cons

Some workplace relationships are built on secret agendas and unfounded biases, which can cause those beyond the inner circle to feel isolated and abandoned. Cliques can lead to paranoia, disloyalty, distrust, ineffectiveness, low morale, and low productivity. There is also an increased potential for lawsuits and grievances filed by disgruntled friends.

Tips

Seek friendships with people who share your interests, personality traits, common values, and experiences. Befriend those you respect and learn from who might, in turn, learn from you. These friends should be fun to spend time with – even if they couldn't help your career. But remember: it's hard to separate business from pleasure. Don't talk about your weekend together at the morning staff meeting. Exchange personal gifts outside of work. Don't single your friend out for praise or recognition at the expense of someone else who also may deserve it.

If you are mature enough to understand where personal and professional relationships begin and end, they can absolutely enrich your life. If you're not so sure where those boundaries are, the experts say, keep your distance.

