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- “ Keep your work life and business life separate.
- “ Don't get involved in your employees' personal matters.
- “ There is no place for friendships in the office.

TREATING EMPLOYEES LIKE PALS CAN BE A DANGEROUS GAME

ALL of these sayings are age-old advice, but that advice is out of sync with what really happens in our workplaces. Inevitably, friendships form, and, oftentimes, it is impossible for employees to leave personal issues at home.

As business leaders, however, we have to recognise that, while work and personal lives intersect, and that while we ourselves are not immune to this intersection, we have a special responsibility to treat workplace friendships deliberately.

Knowing about your employees' personal lives is just good management. Our employees are people with lives outside the office.

Being aware of what is going on “at home” is important, as it can impact your employees' professional lives. Yet, while we have to be in tune with our employees' personal lives, we also have to be equally aware of the drawbacks of this “friend zone”.

BEWARE: THE FRIEND ZONE

Friendships that develop among key executives and their employees can negatively impact business and professionalism. So, be mindful.

When friendships form, here's what executives should be exceptionally watchful of when it comes to “The Friend Zone”, and how they should manage their way through it.

1 CLIQUES ARE CORROSIVE

Allowing cliques to develop is dangerous. When a group of employees starts

going out to lunch, grabbing drinks after work, gossiping and excluding others, the rest of the team may feel like anonymous, unconnected, second-class citizens (some of whom may be your best workers).

Having an office that tolerates cliques will drive these superstars out the door.

2 THIS ISN'T A COUNTRY CLUB

If overt friendships develop, perceptions of an uneven playing field can develop.

Employees “on the outs” start to feel that your chummy pals have better access to you than does the rest of the team and that those pals are more likely to receive special treatment (e.g. deadline extensions, time out of the office, etc).

3 DON'T PLAY POLITICS

Friendships make it more difficult to execute your duties as a manager. Imagine what will happen if a subordinate starts to take advantage of the relationship, showing up late to work, missing deadlines.

Will you be prepared to act, or will that person get away with things no-one else does?

4 CREATE SEPARATION

You must be able to separate friendships from the execution of your duties. When the performance of one of your friends is declining, or your friend is taking advantage of the relationship and getting away with things no-one else is, you must be prepared to act.

The closer friends that you are – maybe your families and spouses are friends – the more difficult this can

become. However, your role as a manager is to handle these sorts of issues when they arise.

ENSURE LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

Friendships are going to form. Let's accept reality. But, once they do, it's all about managing them.

We will have different levels of personal chemistry with different employees, and friendships may form with some and not others.

Our duty to the organisation is paramount. We must make an extra effort to create a level playing field. We must be equally accessible to all of our team and ensure that treatment is fair and consistent.

HERE'S HOW:

1 PROTECT YOUR PEOPLE

Safeguard a level playing field. Make yourself equally accessible to all of your team members.

Ensure that treatment is fair and consistent, and avoid talking with your friends about business issues that they otherwise would not have access to.

2 AVOID FORCED FUN

If you're passionate about golf, roller skating, professional wrestling or anything else, don't make that the key for

employees to have access to you.

Appreciate that your workplace has diverse people with diverse interests. Don't force your personal passions on the team and don't make that the only (or best) way for them to have access.

3 SET BOUNDARIES

If a strong friendship grows, have a conversation. Set mutually agreed-upon boundaries.

If you're really friends, the boundaries will be accepted. If they are not accepted, then you should consider whether you're being taken advantage of.

4 SHARE THE WEALTH

You don't have to be “friends” to have a genuine interest in what's going on with all of your team members outside of work. Showing a personal interest in your employees' lives can help you be a better manager.

For example, knowing what's going on with them personally might explain a disruption in performance and allow for faster resolution.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

As leaders, we must know what is going on with our employees personally, to some degree. Showing an interest is the same as showing respect.

However, be aware of when that personal interaction journeys into “The Friend Zone”, and have a clear plan in place to manage it.

Ignoring this reality is sure to damage your business and even your career.

■ *Corporate culture and management advisor Brian Fielkow is the author of Driving to Perfection: Achieving Business Excellence by Creating a Vibrant Culture, a how-to book based on his 25 years of executive leadership experience at publicly and privately held companies. He is also president of a logistics company in Houston. To learn how to set a professional boundary with your employees, email us at training@leaderonomics.com*

