

THE FRIEND FACTOR

Being promoted above your work colleagues raises the challenge of maintaining the connection while having to give direction.



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We've worked together for three years, navigated difficult projects, said no to clients, pushed back on directives given by the boss, and we've triumphed through it all. Through the success of the challenge, we've forged strong bonds; these are my mates, the people I trust to have my back every day and who know I have theirs.

Then the opportunity arises to step into a leadership role. My hand goes up, and after a few conversations a new title sits next to my name. My teammates are proud and supportive. They know me well, and I'm excited to be leading them into the next challenges. This will work well ... won't it?

Navigating the challenge of stepping into a leadership role with people who have been your colleagues, your equals, your friends, is one many leaders struggle with. The bond of complaining about the boss together becomes a little awkward when you become the boss. It is harder still if your colleagues are family members, people you need to have the performance conversation with at work, and then share a meal together after work.

In an era where there is heavy discussion on employee engagement, the big question is how do you maintain the connection with your team while setting direction?

PRACTICAL FRAMEWORK

Non-verbal communication expert Michael Grinder has a useful and practical framework to help navigate the transition from friend to boss. We need to be able to step into two roles, he suggests, and move between them both. These are our PERSON and our POSITION.



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When we step into our PERSON, we have conversations that are connecting and in which we can express our thoughts and feelings in a way that others get to know who we are. This is where our friendship and authenticity is expressed.

When we step into our POSITION, we recognise that it is the responsibility of a manager and leader to call out behaviour that is not in line with business direction.

From our POSITION we need to be able to take decisive action when performance or strategy shifts. Our fear is that when we do this our colleagues may not like us, that we may no longer be part of the “gang”. While this may be true, what people value more is a leader who will recognise great work, and provide relevant, useful feedback when performance needs to be moulded.

When having to lead friends, pressure can come from two directions. Firstly, we can be hesitant to rattle the cage of a solid connection with others. Deeper down, there can be a desire to be liked and to belong to a group. This is a desire hard-wired into all of us. No-one likes to be on the outer. As a result, we tend to avoid conversations or situations that might jeopardise this situation.

Secondly, the people we are now leading may not take our direction seriously. We may find ourselves saying things like “It’ll be right” or “We don’t need to worry about that, do we?”, when actually as a leader it is clear we do indeed need to worry about something.

Being able to shift between the two states of PERSON and POSITION is the key skill in navigating the challenge of leading friends. Using Grinder’s framework, there are three categories leaders can fall into...

1. Confidante, where leaders work only from their PERSON. There is an ability to connect, understand and even empathise, which has great benefits for building trust and engagement. This often works well in the short term, but such leaders will avoid the tough conversation. Chasing only friendship results in poor leadership. Sure it might feel good, but ultimately people do need and crave direction.

2. Controller, a leader who works only from their POSITION. Every connection and conversation is driven by a focus on targets,

performance, strategy and meeting the customer’s needs. While this approach often gets the job done, it can do so at the detriment of relationships.

3. Charisma. Leaders who embrace charisma are able to expertly shift between PERSON and POSITION as the situation requires. It is a recognition that communication needs to be not just transactional but also relational. We need to connect with and understand others. There also can be moments of making the tough decisions and holding others accountable. As leader, this is doing your job.

With two or more people working together, at some point conflict is likely with varying opinions. When you are leading family and friends, it is even more important to address conflict situations. Within the work environment there are three points at which conflict can be discussed:

1. During conflict. This is never the best time for discussion as emotions are running high, and logic and rational thinking are often running low.

2. After the conflict. This is usually when conflict is addressed. Following the situation we quickly pick up the pieces, discussing how to ensure it will not happen again.

3. Before the conflict. This is the best time to address the inevitable. Have conversations with your team about conflict before emotions become heightened. Set up a “conflict fire-drill” – an expectation of behaviours for everyone when a situation arises with conflicting opinions. Have this conversation early.

Navigating the challenge of leading friends is not easy. This is because emotions are part of the equation, and these are connections we truly care about. We may need to change how we interact and set new parameters in our conversations. However, once we are both clear and comfortable about both our PERSON and our POSITION, others will value our ability to create genuine connection and set important direction. With the right tools and approach, these can be some of the greatest work environments you can experience. ■

