

How to interact with subordinates outside of work



When you're spending a good part of each day with the same people and working toward common goals, establishing positive relationships raises morale and makes time pass more pleasantly. But should these friendships continue beyond the office when you're the boss?

The answer will differ by individual. Some leaders strictly separate professional and personal spheres, while others don't see a problem merging the two. (And, of course, there's a whole lot of middle ground.)

To help make decisions about how close to get to employees, consider the following:

Social outings

The gang invites you along to happy hour after work on Friday. A few guys are catching a baseball game on Saturday and ask you to join. You just installed a backyard pool and are toying with the idea of hosting a BBQ that includes team members. How can you figure out what to do?

- **Judge your comfort level.** Some managers truly enjoy interacting in a casual setting, and others do not. People in the latter group may want to decline politely rather than setting up an awkward situation for all.
- **Be inclusive.** Failure to invite everyone to your event or only taking up certain employees on their offer can lead to hurt feelings or charges of favoritism.

"It's OK to be friendly as the boss and go to a few social events to show you care and like everyone and that you can be fun, but *never* become part of the office clique," says executive coach Kathi Elster, co-author of *Mean Girls at Work* and co-host of the podcast *My Crazy Office*. "Since the boss will have to give feedback, review staff, and possibly fire someone, it's risky if they become too close."

- **Beware of perception.** Attending a concert with fellow jazz enthusiasts on staff might not seem like a big deal to you, but others could read more into it. They may see it as co-workers "trying to get on your good side." If the attendees are of your same gender, it might look like bias (as in "old boys club"); if not, gossip of romantic intentions could circulate.

"Perception is a problem," says Ed Muzio, CEO of Group Harmonics and author of *Make Work Great*. "Even if no favoritism or insider conversations are happening, people may still think they are. Perception can be harder to manage than reality, and intentionally keeping some distance may be the safest course."

- **Consider "the morning after."** Always remember that what happens after hours still affects your

reputation. Don't cross the line of getting drunk or high with staff or participating in anything lewd or distasteful. Similarly, bringing team members together with your outside-of-work friends could result in them telling stories or information you'd prefer not to have shared.

Social media

Speaking of oversharing . . . 21st-century managers also must figure out how office friendships fit into their online life. The same considerations discussed earlier tend to apply here.

If the whole thing makes you nervous, simply let others know your blanket policy of not accepting friend requests from work colleagues. Or, if you prefer, ask those who want to connect to do so only through LinkedIn—the site most associated with professional networking.

On any platform, choosing to friend certain team members but not others can lead to bad blood and rumors. While your reasons—such as a common interest—may seem perfectly logical to you, shunned parties can view it as preferential treatment or be genuinely hurt.

Even if you extend invites to everyone, realize that you could be creating awkwardness. Employees may feel obligated to accept your Facebook request or worry that you're trying to learn things about their private lives. Be sure to let them know participation is truly optional, you won't hold a grudge, and that you respect their decision.

Finally, consider whether you want to constantly monitor what you post. That goofy meme might draw laughs from your college roommates but raise eyebrows among your staff. Or pictures of your house renovations may interest your siblings but be perceived by colleagues as proof that you earn too much money. Privacy settings can help, but many leaders ultimately decide they'd rather just avoid the matter by keeping workplace interaction in the office and off the Internet.