

## ethikos Volume 32, Number 5. September 01, 2018 Friendship, perception, and setting boundaries

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Many folks form non-romantic friendships in the workplace. Long-term relationships are often made in places where the most time is spent. Sometimes these relationships continue long after the individuals stop working for the same organization.

Human dynamics is complicated with many components. Greater attention to office friendships will go a long way toward nurturing a healthy organizational culture.

### **Friendship**

People bond in a work environment for a variety of reasons. It's life and there's nothing wrong with it, until it impacts department or organizational morale. These friendships, among many possibilities, may enable complacency toward poor performance or encourage looking the other way when it comes to bad conduct.

Many years ago, I witnessed the chief operating officer (COO) repeatedly ignore the improper behavior of her long-time friend, the chief executive officer (CEO). The CEO engaged in sexual harassment and the COO insisted she never witnessed or heard anything about it. Unfortunately, the board of directors was as much to blame for not having a better understanding of internal relationships as the abuser and enabler for their bad deeds.

Friendship in the workplace need not be about dating. Companies seem to have handled this natural workplace occurrence far better than platonic friendship. Often there are clear prohibitions regarding a supervisor and a subordinate dating. In other cases, no level of dating is permitted.

In my experience, platonic relationships can pose a greater challenge. They're not clear cut. You can't prohibit people from socializing outside the workplace. You can't stop them from building bonds of trust and collegiality. In fact, it is healthy to build these bonds. It can make for a stronger team spirit.

Yet they can also create conflicts. These conflicts are not limited to folks in senior or middle management. Frontline staff can be faced with them on a regular basis, whether a friend-coworker uses company time to study for a night class or spends too much time on Facebook.

Although conflicts stemming from friendship can occur at every level, senior and mid-level conflicts are the most problematic, because they potentially impact an organization on a much larger level.

It should be no surprise to any leader or manager in a decision-making role that playing favorites in handing out assignments is detrimental to one's personal and professional reputation.<sup>[1]</sup> Once you compromise a reputation for fairness and objectivity, you have nothing left — and the impact on morale can be devastating. There are times to recuse oneself in a decision-making process. And if you don't, be sure the decision and the reasoning behind it is well documented.

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