Getting Personal at Work



Question: What is an appropriate response or policy related to the issue of workplace friendships? I want employees to enjoy working together but have found that some employees who are friends outside of work are disrupting the workplace with their friendship.

When Employees Become BFF's

Many employees spend more time with their coworkers than with their personal friends. It is not uncommon for coworkers, especially young coworkers (and particularly the millennial generation) to form personal relationships with coworkers. Many new employees send a social network request to coworkers or exchange personal phone numbers after joining a new organization. This can lead to texting. These easy methods of connecting create a sense of intimacy and the potential for a deeper connection that can result in a genuine friendship. In life, friendships are important; however, they may not always be in the best interest of your company when they occur in the workplace.

To some extent, you can discourage workplace romance but it is difficult – and not necessarily a good idea – to discourage employees from forming personal friendships. The key to balancing working and personal relationships is to be prepared for any potential problems and be able to address conflicts quickly, should they arise.

Positive And Negative Sides of Workplace Friendships

In a 2010 Randstad study of US workers, a majority of workers reported that workplace friendships fostered higher job satisfaction, were motivating, increased support, reduced turnover, created employee engagement, and increased productivity.

On the negative side, between 34% and 44% workers reported that workplace friendships fed gossip, cultivated favoritism, blurred professional boundaries, and created conflicts of interest. A small number, between 16% and 25%, suggested that friendships cause others to feel uncomfortable, harm productivity, and reduced constructive feedback and openness at work. Baby boomers and managers reported these negative consequences more frequently.

Understanding the potential positives and negatives associated with workplace friendships is an important part of managing a workforce.

Guidelines for Workplace Friendships

1. Employees who are friends, both at work and outside of work, may benefit from not working in teams of 3 or 4 where they make up the controlling interest.
2. Discretion is key. Unless and until a friendship is very well established over time, remind employees of the value of discretion and taking caution about what they share. Personal information shared in confidence with a friend may find its way into the workplace.
3. No public bashing. Be cautious about bashing a boss, coworkers, or customers. In a private setting, friends may share stories of frustration that can easily seep out in the workplace or into a social network.
4. Keep personal discussions outside of the workplace. Discussing weekend plans should be limited to unpaid time.
5. Do not only socialize with only a small circle of workplace friends. Take the time to meet other employees and expand your circle of acquaintances.

What Can a Manager Say?

Many supervisors notice that employees who spend a lot time together behind closed doors or speak in whispers are almost always less productive. The first step toward tacking this problem involves addressing the issue of productivity or workplace disruption – not the friendship. Speak to the employees separately and ask each what is impacting their workplace performance. If necessary, indicate your observation is that they are spending too much time socializing and not enough time performing work.

If negativity, gossip, or favoritism is the issue, it may be time for the manager to help these employees set more boundaries concerning acceptable behavior. It is imperative to identify workplace expectations for behaviour and company culture. Separate the employees and remind them that conversations should be focused on work tasks during working hours. Assigning a mentor to work with each employee separately can provide the employee with another person with whom to form a positive working relationship.

People need emotional support, and workplace friendships can contribute to these supports. If a workplace friendship positively impacts your workplace, then support and encourage it. If the friendship is having a negative impact on either employee or on other workers, then take the time to intervene.

Encourage healthy workplace collaboration and increase engagement and productivity. Failure to notice friendships going off the rails or taking over conversations can be bad for business. Know what you are looking for and be prepared to step in when you see it.

Sources

Nearly Half Of All Working Adults Socialize With Colleagues