

Should I Be this Person's Reference?



Question:

Recently, a colleague asked me to be her reference for an upcoming interview within our organization. As an HR professional, I know the importance of a good reference. My problem is that I do not really want to offer her a recommendation. Personally, I am not a big fan of her and do not feel I can be objective.

Answer:

Being a reference for someone is a lot of pressure. You often feel a responsibility to help them succeed but are not always certain what to say when the questions are asked. In this circumstance you may be concerned about your reputation. When you add your personal feelings to the equation, you are faced with a professional dilemma.

When To Accept

What are you comfortable saying? With personal feelings put aside, can you recommend your colleague's work related skills and abilities? Can you identify projects she has worked on or accomplishments she has achieved? When you think about these can you identify her contributions? How comfortable would you be if asked to discuss her work ethic, what she is like as a team member or if you would 'hire her'? Stop and think about how you will respond to these questions for a few minutes.

As a professional part of your role should involve being able to step back and objectively identify the skills and contributions an employee brings to the table or the team. If you are capable of answering these key questions you can consider acting as a reference. Think of it as a good professional growth exercise.

When to Decline

However, if, after putting your personal feelings towards this person aside, you feel you cannot recommend her, her skills or abilities strongly then you should consider declining. You do not want to put yourself in a position where say something negative when others are saying positive things or where you recommend someone and later the person fares poorly in the job.



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Declining with Grace

It is easy to simply decline by saying 'No' or 'Sorry I do not feel comfortable right now'. And perhaps that is enough. However, consider adding more. You might want to ask your colleague why she is asking for a reference. Her response may teach you something about yourself and your perceptions.

Consider explaining your hesitation. Mention that you are not certain about her skills, work ethic and you are not certain she is a good teammate (don't mention all three).

This might be an opportunity to help her grow, or to grow yourself. Listen to her and re-evaluate your perceptions. Perhaps she would be great for the role she is being considered for and this could be an opportunity for you to see that.