

Should I Put the Brakes on a Budding Workplace Friendship?



Question:

I have been building a personal friendship with an employee from my workplace. She is not a direct report but someone in a less senior position. It began when we saw each other at an event and discovered we shared a common interest. I could see us becoming good personal friends. As we have shared more conversations, she has told me negative things about her co-workers, nothing serious, and she mentioned her lack of commitment to her current job. None of these things bother me personally but I wonder how to proceed with this friendship that I am enjoying very much.

Answer:

Real friendships are a valuable commodity and can be important to your emotional and physical health. Workplace friendships can include both positive and negative aspects and when you are in a position of more senior responsibility it can be more difficult to maintain a friendship with someone in a subordinate role, but this does not mean it is not possible if you proceed intelligently.

TODAY'S EXPERT

Tara Orchard is a consultant, strategist, coach, trainer and writer. She combines psychology, personal development, social/emotional intelligence, learning strategies and technology trends with a capacity to deliver information and coach others successfully.

Define Your Boundaries

At these early stages it is too soon to tell how valuable this friendship may become. Establish professional and personal boundaries. Take it one step at a time.

1) What happens at work stays at work:

Make this friendship about time outside of the workplace. When you get together, do not discuss workplace related people, policy or business beyond the most general topics. This is particularly important for you, as you may be privy to confidential information.

What can you say? Next time you meet up with this person, tell them how nice it is to have someone you can hang out and that you want to agree to leave all workplace conversations at the workplace.

2) What happens outside work stays outside work:

This is not about hiding anything but keeping it separate. You do not have to run the other way when you see the person but do not make plans to get together during work hours in front of other employees. Do not drop by this person's space. Do not sit and chat together at length about your activities.

What can you say? Be up front and tell them you want to keep work about work and you do not want to share your personal plans with others at the workplace. Let your friend know you are following this advice yourself.

No matter how little direct influence you have over your friend's employment, others may assume it. This may become a problem. People may be aware that you are participating in a shared activity outside of work, but if it is not put directly in front of them, you can minimize the potential impact.

Friends are great, but so are wonderful companions and acquaintances. There is less pressure with acquaintances. You mention that your colleague is not particularly committed to her job. Perhaps she will find another job in the near future, and the pressure will be off of you. Until then, know your boundaries and have fun.