Balancing Friendships and Leadership in the Professional World

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Looking at my experience as a manager of a big team and that transition to Leader, I was always caught between the devil and the deep blue sea when it came to my friends and then assuming a leadership role, where these friends then reported to me. It's a tough gig balancing these relationships, and it made me think about how I managed to balance them and the wider picture of building a tight-knit team and my responsibility to drive results.

The Rewards and Risks of Team Friendships

At first glance, the idea of fostering friendships within my team seemed a great idea. A friendly relationship with them could lead to a great working environment, create open communication channels, and develop a sense of loyalty between the team and me. However, I kept thinking of having difficult conversations with people I had met as friends last night, which filled me with abject horror!

I once had a manager in my team who had an infectious, happy nature and always made close friendships with her team. This made her incredibly approachable and popular among her team members. They felt comfortable sharing their ideas and concerns, creating a positive and collaborative work environment where ideas came naturally and innovation flourished.
However, as time went on, the lines blurred. When one of her team, who had also become a close friend, consistently underperformed, she found it challenging to give the critical feedback needed, fearing it might strain their personal relationship. We talked a lot about this avoidance leading to underperformance, and it was obviously causing a decrease in overall team productivity and morale. It was a difficult time for the team as they felt her friends could get away with things the rest couldn't, and really the only way to deal with it for some was to move on, leading to a constant state of flux in her team.

The Essential Role of Managers

Despite any personal relationships formed, it's important to remember that a leader's role demands objectivity, fairness, and maintaining a professional environment that leads to productivity and growth.
I had another manager in my team who had also developed great relationships with his team. They would often socialise after work, which developed their team relationships. However, he always clarified that his leadership responsibility came first and would not be compromised.

When one of his friends in the team started missing deadlines, he didn't wait to address the issue. He held an open but respectful conversation with them about his concern for the declining performance and offered assistance to get them back on track. This worked well and maintained his leadership responsibilities but also allowed him to show concern for a friend along the way.

Strategies for Achieving the Balance

These two examples show the rewards and risks of forming friendships within your team. I've also been in both situations throughout my career, and I must say, the latter is by far the best outcome. I also found that the action becomes easier to decide once you rationalise why you are there (and who is paying you).

So, how can we balance creating team camaraderie and upholding our leadership responsibilities? Here are some key strategies:

Clear Boundary Setting: From the beginning, establish clear professional boundaries, even as you build personal relationships within your team. Open Communication: Be transparent about your dual role - a leader and a friend. Encourage your team members to understand and respect this dual responsibility.

Professional Stance: Set a standard of professionalism in all work-related interactions. This stance can set the tone for the entire team. Impartial Decision-making: Ensure all decisions, particularly those related to performance evaluation, promotions, or conflict resolution, are made impartially, without favouritism.

Separating Personal Emotions: Learn to separate personal feelings from professional responsibilities, especially when dealing with performance issues or conflicts.

The Friday Night Scenario

The casual Friday night event puts this balance to the test. This situation presents a golden opportunity to enhance team rapport, but it's essential to remember that while socialising with the team, you must retain your professional stance and responsibilities. This doesn't mean you can't enjoy the occasion, but remember that a professional relationship should always take precedence.

From my experience (and I didn't always get it right), I would also take my personal friendships away from work. Meeting at weekends and not with others from the office. It's much easier to maintain personal friendships in this way, as the friend then knows when it's friendship and when it's a manager stance they are dealing with. All teams like a good moan, and allowing them to do this on a Friday together without their manager being there was great. The other thought was that I didn't want anything to fester over the weekend and spill into the office on a Monday. Instead, let them have a good moan together with a few drinks, put the world to rights and then forget about it over the weekend!

The other issue with being there is Dutch courage! Everyone thinks it's a great idea to bring an issue up with their boss when they've had a few drinks outside the office and not to take no for an answer. It's best to avoid this at all costs as they don't think clearly, are embarrassed on Monday, and then it's twice as much work to put right during the working week!

So, navigating the minefield of friendships and leadership is challenging, but it's an essential aspect of your leadership journey. By thinking it through, as a leader, you can build a tight, high-performing team while maintaining your leadership role.