



LEADERSHIP insights

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Struggling with
managing the
“friend” issue in
your department?

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FRIENDS *and* RELATIONSHIPS

I love Marcus Buckingham’s statement, “If you don’t care about people, get out of management.” But is building “friendship” the same as building a caring “relationship”? Like many things, there are pluses and minuses when it comes to friendships at work. **For a manager**, the downside of being friends with the people who report to you means you might get accused of playing favorites (which may – or may not – be true). People may claim you are unfair, or that their confidential information risks being shared with the friend, affecting trust in your team. Boundaries can start to blur and make giving difficult feedback even harder than it already is if your friend has a job performance issue. A parting of ways can leave you feeling vulnerable.

But the Gallup organization in its workplace engagement research of thousands of working adults shows that the **plus side of friendship at work outweighs the risks**. When employees have a best friend at work they are more:

- Committed
- Safe
- Productive
- Likely to stay

In fact, “employees who have a close friendship with their manager are more than 2.5 X more likely to be satisfied with their job.” In his book Vital Friends, Tom Rath proposes that all of our friends play different “vital” roles in our lives. Two friend roles, the **Companion** (the one who is there for you at all times), or **Collaborator** (with whom you share common interests) might have the most potential to result in the downside of friendships between managers and employees. It requires diligence and consistency to prevent misunderstandings and anxiety with the rest of your team. And it takes the long view of leadership because trust will build over time when you consistently show fairness and keep confidences. But if you can expand your view of “friendship” to be able to match what your employees need from you, **everybody wins**.

So **what kind of friend can you be** to your employees? Some of the friendship roles from Vital Friends are listed here, with tips on how to be that role in employees’ lives:

Builder – Like it sounds, build people up. Notice and point out the best in your people. Nudge them to do more than they think they can.

Champion – Manage your employees “up.” Tell others of their accomplishments. Use your influence to open doors for them. Help them see where new skills can take them.

Connector – Let employees know you want them to use you as a resource to connect them to networks and others who can help them, then put them in touch. Introduce your employees to others who might be able to give them a leg up.

Energizer – Make people laugh. Brighten their day with your mood. Be the kind of person that lights up a room when you walk into it. Encourage fun and laughter.

Mind Opener – Ask meaningful, thought provoking questions that challenge conventional thinking. Invite employees to educational opportunities that help them see a different view.

Navigator – Help struggling employees see the big picture. Be a sounding board. Encourage critical thinking skills. Share a little about challenges you have overcome. Help them re-focus to being successful at work if they do share personal struggles.

Sound like any of the friends in your life? Maybe your own manager? They are all good coaching tips, which use the **power of the relationship** in different types of friendship for the employees’ success.