How Friendly Can You Get With Staff?

Jessica McMahon | Image: Jeremy Bruneel

Published: December 02, 2009   BC Business Magazine

There's a thin line between a boss sharing a coffee break with employees and sharing their Facebook profile.
Finding a balance between being approachable and being buddies is tricky, so we brought in the pros to help draw that line: Cissy Pau, principal consultant at Clear HR Consulting Inc.; Carolin Rekar Munro, associate professor for leadership and human resources at Royal Roads University; and Dan Pearce,   facilitator of leadership programs at Catalyst Training Services Inc.

Who's the Boss?

It's important to be clear about your leadership role from the start, says Rekar Munro. By treating an employee like a friend, the lines can become blurred and your authority may be undermined. However, don't abuse your authority. State your expectations clearly to your staff, tell them what you value about the work they're doing and give them details on how you wish to work with them, says Rekar Munro. "Coach employees to succeed," adds Pearce. "Don't police them just to know when they fail."

Communication is Key

Be sure to encourage social interaction, since work is a big part of most people's lives. "You want to have that human touch – be more than just a business face," says Pau. Create a forum for employees to ask you questions and make sure you're approachable, advises Rekar Munro. But keep personal conversation light; talk weekends and families, not messy divorces and Paula's new nose. Remember, you are their friendly boss, not their friend.

To "Friend" or not to "Friend"?

Tweeting, Facebooking, MySpacing ... it's all new territory in boss-employee relations. "It's the first time in history we've had four generations in the workforce," says Pearce, so a protocol for social networking must negotiate gaps between generations. The trick is to meet halfway: use these tools as a platform for engaging the workforce, not as a way to connect with employees on a personal level. Rekar Munro suggests asking yourself, Is there a way I can use these sites in a professional sense?

Know When the Party's Over

Out-of-office social gatherings promote a team atmosphere, but be careful. Your choice of social event to attend depends on the culture of the office. In some offices, watching a sports game might be appropriate, while in others supporting a charity or organizing an office barbecue might be more suitable. Try to avoid activities with alcohol, as it could turn into a liability. However, Pau suggests that if you do choose to treat employees to a round of drinks, don't stick around long after.

Play Fair

It's natural to gravitate to certain people over others, says Pau, but don't be overly friendly with specific employees. This could lead to the creation of cliques, ugly office gossip, a decline in productivity or even an employee's departure. Rekar Munro says you should ask yourself, Is this behaviour precedent-setting? Will it establish a new norm? To gain trust from employees, Pearce recommends three things: "Be ultimately fair, be consistent and be timely."