



ENHANCING WORKPLACE CULTURE

Can Your Boss Be Your Friend? Tips for Navigating This Complex Relationship

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For many of us in veterinary medicine, our coworkers are much more than just people we see at work; they are often some of our closest friends and even chosen family. But what happens when we further complicate that relationship with the hospital's management structure? Can we really be friends with the boss? Can the boss be friends with a direct report?



Managing a friendship as well as managing each other at work is a difficult balance. The authors are here to tell you that it can be done, but there are some things that you must think about when your boss becomes your friend.

Tami is the employee in the work relationship. Megan was always someone Tami had looked up too. They were very similar in their views of education and teaching but didn't know each other well. When the manager's position became open at Purdue University, the team felt it should be an outside hire so they could bring in a new perspective. So, Tami called Megan, let her know that she would be a good fit, and Megan soon moved to Indiana to join the team.

Megan is the boss in the work relationship. She moved from Oregon to Indiana to take a job in academia, a world unknown to her. Her only friend in Indiana and her mentor in academia, Tami, happened to be one of her direct reports. Tami also happens to be Megan's nextdoor neighbor. How was Megan going to earn and keep the respect of the team when they know she has this close friendship with one of her direct reports?

Here lies the predicament: Tami's mentor, teacher, and now friend, was becoming her boss. This definitely isn't an easy transition for most. One must have the emotional intelligence to handle this relationship. It takes a lot of work and effort, but in the long run, it can be totally worth it.

SET EXPECTATIONS AND BOUNDARIES

The most important step to take is to start talking about the situation, the power dynamic, and how it may make some future conversations awkward. Acknowledge the importance of the friendship and the mutual goal of keeping a strong professional and strong personal relationship alive. Set the expectation that honesty is valued and that each party needs to feel empowered to speak up if they feel they are being treated differently than other employees due to the friendship.

Both sides must also set boundaries. Boundaries are very important. The boss cannot be talking about what happened in meetings, and it's an abuse of the friendship for the employee to ask. If one gets curious or forgets the boundaries, it's important to state what is and what is not appropriate to talk about. It is essential to everyone's role on the team to keep certain sensitive



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subjects confidential. This can also go for conversations employees have without the boss around; no one likes a tattletale that runs to the boss with every little complaint heard from coworkers. Set those boundaries up front and remind yourself of them often, as they are important in both directions.

It can be helpful to state at the beginning of conversations, or even in the middle of them, the expectations of each other. Saying, "I need to have this conversation with my boss" or "I need my friend right now" might sound awkward at first but it puts everyone in the best frame of mind to have a productive and transparent conversation.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

One of the easiest strategies to preserving a professional and personal relationship is to keep work at work and outside interests outside of the work setting. When at the hospital or clinic, limit the conversations to work- and team-related issues. As soon as conversations veer into something too personal, someone needs to speak up and request to finish the topic outside of work. The same rule applies to discussing work outside of the hospital. It's natural to weave personal and professional topics into all of our conversations, but it is important to keep the intense conversations to the appropriate location. Sometimes a simple "do we need to head to work to finish this conversation?" can be a good reminder to head to more neutral topics.

Outside of work, limit work talk. The authors admit that they can sometimes get a little out of control but are very good about talking about work for 10 minutes while walking the dogs together and then quickly finding something else to discuss. Give yourself a "work talk" time limit. It isn't great to talk about work all the time and, though cathartic, venting can sometimes do more harm than good.



FOCUS ON FAIRNESS

Other team members will be on the lookout for signs of favoritism, so it is important that everyone is treated fairly by the boss. It is necessary to have written job descriptions, policies, and procedures to follow, as this can help ensure fairness. Use caution not to tip the scales in the other direction and treat your friend too harshly just to prove that you can mete out justice.

Continued personal fairness checks by the boss (asking themselves questions such as, “If this situation was happening with employee X, what would I do?”) are important to stay on track. Challenging feedback to a friend can be difficult to give, but the boss cannot shy away from it. Deliver the feedback knowing it will help your friend become a better employee, but give them the space to receive it and work through it.

The same advice goes for the employee in the situation. Constructive feedback can be difficult to receive, and

Tami Lind

Tami is the current intensive care unit, emergency room, and intermediate care supervisor at the Purdue University Veterinary Teaching Hospital. Tami attended veterinary technology school at Purdue and graduated in 2010 with her bachelor's degree in veterinary technology. Tami started as a veterinary technician in the ICU and has been the supervisor at Purdue since 2012. She received her VTS credential in emergency and critical care in 2016. She enjoys teaching new veterinary nurses and veterinary students and prepares them for their career ahead. In her spare time she enjoys hanging out with her German Shorthaired Pointers, mixed-up mutt, cat, 26 chickens and ducks, and 2-legged husband.



Megan Brashear

Megan graduated in 2000 with a bachelor of science degree in veterinary technology and obtained her VTS credential in emergency and critical care in 2004. She has enjoyed working in emergency and critical care since 2000 and is the senior manager of veterinary nursing at the Purdue University Veterinary Hospital. Here, Megan truly enjoys the opportunity to work with veterinary nursing supervisors as well as teach and train veterinary nurses and veterinary nursing students in the hospital. She loves to travel and lecture, sharing her knowledge with veterinary nurses and technicians around the world.



BUILDING BOUNDARIES Tami and Megan prioritize work discussions inside and personal matters outside of the clinic.

that goes double if that feedback comes from someone you consider to be your friend. It's important to talk about it as professionals and also work through it as an individual. The employee has to realize their friend was doing their job and trying to make the employee a better person in the long run. Give each other space to work through what can be challenging feelings, and focus on the things outside of work that keep the friendship strong until the balance is set once again.

Be open and transparent with employees who show concern about your friendship, and never hide from the truth. Openly disclose the friendship, but note that you are striving for fairness with everyone and you appreciate the opportunity to discuss it with anyone. Admit any mistakes in judgment that may arise and continue to work toward equal fairness with all team members.

Lastly, use caution with social media. With everyone's lives on constant display, social media can be a trap with any manager and their team. Utilize discretion with your online life and the time you spend outside of work with coworkers, and resist the urge to pass judgment on your team due to their online accounts.

SUMMARY

It takes extra effort, but it is possible to create lasting friendships between managers and direct reports. By maintaining boundaries and setting clear expectations, you don't need to be an island at work! **TVN**