



CUSTOMER SERVICE JOB FEATURE



Should We Separate Our Work and Personal Lives?

[By Michael Lee Stallard]

When I was younger, I believed that it was best to separate my work life from my personal life. Experience has taught me this isn't wise. Now, I'm a strong proponent of making friends at work, and I feel friendships should be encouraged because they promote trust, cooperation, and esprit de corps. Friendships act as the lubrication, if you will, that makes the engine of task excellence in organizations perform at sustainable levels. Absent friendships, task excellence is more likely to break down for one simple reason: the lack of active cooperation among members in an organization.

The root word of corporation is "corpus," which, in Latin, means "body." Sadly, most corporations today don't act like a body of people moving and working as one. They lean more toward dog-eat-dog cultures than sled-dog cultures that pull together. Encouraging friendships throughout an organization can help put the corpus back in the corporation by uniting people and aligning their behaviors with organizational goals.

Being around friends enhances our individual performances. Just as friends are more likely to tell you when you have a little green something stuck in your teeth, they are just as likely to tell you what can help you do your job better, especially if it's something that may be uncomfortable to talk about. You may have a habit that's grating on those around you that you are oblivious to. Wouldn't you rather have a friend pull you aside about it than continue on, unaware of the effect you are having on others?

Research in neuroscience has shown us that when we are around people we trust, as we are more likely to be when we are near friends, it stimulates the production of hormones that make us feel more energetic, more creative, and better at problem solving. It also literally "fires up" a part of our

brain that can be seen in brain scans using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) technology.

As in many aspects of life, striking the right balance is key. As a guideline, we recommend that everyone knows and feels they have permission to spend some time (at least 20-30 minutes) with someone whose company they enjoy at least once every four hours. That will keep everyone operating at optimal levels. If we go without that stimulating friendship time, our brains start to short circuit because the need for stimulating relationships is in our DNA.

In some instances, more time spent with friends in the workplace should be encouraged. People need to connect with others when they have gone through difficult times such as the death of a loved one, sickness, or divorce. These painful occurrences wound people, and connecting with friends can help heal and restore them to become productive members of the corporate body. This, too, requires balance and judgment. Often the wound from the inevitable challenges we all eventually face in life may require the attention of mental health professionals or clergy.

While friendships among colleagues have

an overall benefit to the organization, there are two relationship traps that we should all be aware of because they damage the corporate body, just as a disease does.

First, there is the Slacker Disease. If the privilege of taking a coffee break or going out for lunch with a friend at work is abused, then it becomes a form of slacking that is unfair to the team. Giving the green light to friendships is not an open invitation to put the work aside and have a two-hour gabfest at the local Starbucks. Other members of the team are going to be watching, and they'll feel you are cheating the team and will likely begin to resent you for it. To guard against the Slacker Disease, it needs to be clear to everyone that in addition to good relationships among people, excellence is an important value, too. Everyone needs to perform his or her job well for the benefit of the team and overall organization.

There is another aspect of friendships in the workplace to be on the lookout for. We call it the Clique Disease. This disease arises when a group of friends in the workplace forms a clique whose members begin to intentionally or unintentionally exclude others. Think middle school or high school girls here. The parts of the brain where we feel pain actually lights up when we feel excluded from a group. This pain of exclusion triggers



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a breakdown in trust and cooperation and, in the worst cases, it may result in retaliation against the group or its members.

Training can help everyone in organizations to become aware of these potential diseases that damage the corporate body and how to avoid them. We find the training is eye-opening and immensely practical for people in the workplace. It also helps them

understand how to build better friendships and relationships outside the workplace. And that fires them up, too.

About the Author

Michael Lee Stallard is president of E Pluribus Partners, a consulting firm that helps leaders improve employee and customer engagement through leadership

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