

The Thick Line Between Buddy and Boss

By Tim Knox

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Q: One of my key employees is giving me trouble. He has started showing up late for work and has developed a bad attitude in general. The rest of my employees are complaining since they are having to take up his slack. I've tried talking to him, but he doesn't seem to listen. To make matters worse, he has become one of my best friends since I hired him five years ago, so firing him is out of the question. What can I do?
-- Allen B.

A: One reason I am so qualified to dispense sage business advice every week, Allen, is that I have made just about every business blunder you can imagine. I am like the Evel Knievel of the small business world, if Evel Knievel wrote a weekly column on motorcycle safety.

One of the more unpleasant things I've had to do is fire a good friend who was not doing the job I hired him to do. He needed a job, I needed an employee, so I thought I would give him a shot. It turned out to be a match made in business hell. He took advantage of our friendship by showing up late for work, spending time goofing off instead of working, and making a joke out of my complaints about his behavior. Because of our friendship I defended his actions to

my other employees, but after a few weeks I knew I had to show him the door. We're still friends, but certainly not like we were before.

The blunder I made was hiring a friend in the first place. I let emotion, i.e. the desire to help my friend gain employment, get in the way of my business sense. That's what you are doing now, Allen, and I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but you are going to have to deal with this situation soon or your entire operation may be affected by the actions of this one person.

The blunder you have made is that you have befriended an employee, which is something you should never do. I'm not saying you can't be friendly with your employees, but you have attached a considerable amount of emotional baggage to the employer/employee relationship and the result is the situation you are faced with today.

Friends expect preferential treatment simply because they are your friends. The workplace, however, must be a level playing field for all your employees, friends or not. While employees deserve your respect (if it is earned), giving one employee preferential treatment over another is never a good idea. This is a problem experienced by many business owners and managers who allow themselves to become too close to their employees.

I understand that he has become your friend over the years and you'd rather eat rocks than fire him, but you have to consider how his behavior is impacting your business over all. What effect is he having on employee morale, on work schedules, on customer relations, on time spent fixing his mistakes, and most importantly, the bottom line?

You have two options: get him back on track or get him off the payroll, period. That may sound cold and politically incorrect, but those are your only choices. Either way, you must be his employer first and friend second. He may have personal reasons for his performance, but as his employer you are legally limited as to how much prying you can do into his home life. As his friend, however, I expect that you already have a good idea what the problem is. If you can help him return to being a productive member of the team, then do so. If not, wish him well, let him go, and move on.

Here are a few suggestions to help you establish and enforce the boundaries of the employer/employee relationship.

Define the relationship.

Keep your seat, Dr. Phil, this won't take long. The employer/employee relationship should be well-defined from the outset and the parameters understood by all parties. Some call it "defining the pecking order" or "establishing the food chain." Whatever colorful term you use it all boils down to this: You can be their boss or you can be their buddy. You can not be both.

Don't hire friends or relatives.

This rule is certainly bendable if you are the owner of the business and

you hire your children to work for you. Chances are your offspring already accept you as the ultimate authority figure and managing them in a business environment is second nature. However, even this situation could have a negative impact on your business as non-related employees often expect the boss' son, daughter, or best buddy to work less, make more money, and be treated better than everyone else. Whether that's true or not, nepotism and cronyism can create an underlying tension among the ranks.

Establish and adhere to company policies.

It's a good idea to have published policies concerning every aspect of your business, including employee behavior and performance expectations. By its very nature the employer/employee relationship is prone to favoritism. Managers can't help but favor those employees who work harder, longer, and faster, but when it comes to adhering to company policies, there should be no preferential treatment of favored employees. Every employee should receive a copy of your published company policies and sign a form stating that they have read, understand, and agree with the same.

The Bottom Line: treat everyone the same.

It does not matter if the employee is a vice president or a janitor; everyone in your company should be treated the same when it comes to adhering to published company policies and performance expectations.

While it is true that a vice president may be of more value to the company than a janitor, it is also true that a vice president who is running amok can do far more damage to your company than a janitor who lets a toilet back up every once in awhile (there's an analogy there that I will let you figure out on your own).

It's not personal, it's just business.

This is what the movie bad guys say to one another right before the shooting starts. "Hey, Paulie, it's not personal. It's just business." BLAM! BLAM! This is the dating equivalent of saying, "It's not you, it's me." These kinds of statements are not going to make anyone feel better when they are getting dumped or fired. Just ask any former employee or old girlfriend you've used this line on.

If you have to fire an employee - even a friend - do it by the book in a professional manner.

It won't be easy, but you have to remove the emotion and do what's best for your business.

Here's to your success.

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Small Business Q&A is written by veteran entrepreneur and syndicated columnist, Tim Knox. Tim serves as the president and

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