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## Can Employers and Employees Be Friends?

By Toddi Gutner

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**Getting along with your manager or employee is essential for success. But is becoming friends bad for business?**

Relationships, whether personal or professional, are never easy. Just ask the legions of social workers and psychologists who counsel millions of people on just that topic. But managing relationships in the workplace is its own special challenge — especially when it comes to the employer-employee relationship.

All people come to their jobs with different expectations about how friendly they'd like to be with their superiors and subordinates. And since we spend at least 25 percent of our lives at work — more if we're small-business owners — it certainly makes sense that we may want to make meaningful connections with the people around us. But is it a good idea?

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### Setting boundaries

There are no hard-and-fast rules that govern how close a friendship should be between a boss and an employee. But there's a general rule of thumb that boundaries must be created and respected, says Michelle Randall, a management consultant and executive coach at Enriching Leadership International. "Because [the friendship] comes from a professional arena, you're still playing by the guidelines of business."

When you're a business owner or supervisor, you have certain power and influence. "What you say even in a friendly situation can be used against you," says Jonathan Segal, an attorney and columnist for HR Magazine.

Dustin Puryear, CEO of Puryear IT — an IT service and support firm — agrees. He prefers a clear separation between employer and employee. "I'm always friendly, but not friends," says Puryear. "I don't put it out there that I'm one of them." Such boundaries can be prudent. For instance, imagine the awkwardness of having to discipline an employee who was a friend, especially if he or she tried to leverage that friendship.

Puryear thinks his employees appreciate the formal approach. "It keeps the relationship well defined," he says. In his mind, his employees are coming to work to do their jobs — not to make new friends.

### Finding a balance

Still, you don't want to be overly cautious, or blindly "say no to friendship, because that may mean no mentoring," says Segal.

Bottom line: The middle ground is ideal. To be too friendly can result in lower productivity, a loss of respect, and a feeling of entitlement on the part of the employee, says Randall. And if something goes wrong in the friendship, it can create a horrible problem at work.

On the other hand, with trusting relationships, there is better communication, teamwork and collaboration. "People are happy to be [at work] and they are more loyal to the organization," says Randall.

Striking that balance is difficult, to be sure. But there are the occasional situations where employees and employers can be friends — even good friends.

### An exception to every rule

I've personally had the good fortune to experience becoming very close friends with several of my bosses throughout my work life.

Maybe this is because I realize I need to be in environments where I can form trusting, collaborative and meaningful relationships. So, I seek out bosses who I

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think might be open to that kind of friendship. And because I have found them, I know it's possible.

But these friendships ultimately worked because I didn't expect to be treated any differently in the workplace. In fact, because my boss was my friend, I found myself working harder to make sure I didn't disappoint her. I wanted her to look good in front of her bosses.

So while Puryear says his employees come to work to do their jobs — not to make new friends — I come to work for both.

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