Growth and Development in an Organization:
Can Friends Become Colleagues?

Likely you may have experienced some version of the following scenario as you moved along and upward in an organization: all of a sudden, at some level, the "buddies" you joined the organization with are being promoted at a faster or slower pace than you are. You begin to wonder, "Are these my friends, or are they my competitors? Can I trust them to be fair about their assessments of me as we move along our paths? Or are they talking me down to their own benefit, or just not helping/supporting me as much as I am supporting them…?" Worse yet, "Is the organization that frames us all treating and evaluating everyone fairly according to our skills…?"

In our programs, we sometimes use a coaching case that deals with a colleague (or even a subordinate) who becomes the supervisor of someone that used to be at the same (or higher) level in the organizational structure. How do I coach that person and help take away the "sting" of being promoted over? How do I elicit support from someone to whom it might appear that I have taken his/her job?

I think the best practice in the case and to the real-world environment we work in -- where people who were at the same level find themselves at higher (or lower) levels than others that they were compatriots with -- is to create, recognize, and deal with a distinction between "friends" and "colleagues."

In the goal-setting session of our leadership programs, we have used an old Arabian proverb that may define a "friend":

> "A friend is one to whom one may pour out all the contents of one's heart, chaff and grain together, knowing that the gentlest of hands will take and sift it, keep what is worth keeping and with a breath of kindness blow the rest away."

This is a beautiful thought, but I'm wondering if it has much relevance in the world of corporate work. After all, can we really pour out the contents of our hearts to our "friends" at the office? The truth of the matter is that as we develop in an organization, we will grow along certain paths and develop different skills. So although it is not exactly a "zero-sum" game where my promotion means someone else's stagnation, it is clearly true that at some point not everyone will be promoted equally, particularly at upper levels of the hierarchy; and we may find ourselves competing against former friends for a limited number of higher positions.

So it seems useful to me to make the above distinction: we will be open and truthful with our "colleagues," but we will not expect them nor ourselves to be so content with sifting through each other's chaff and grain, and "blowing off" the rest as "friends"…We are <u>colleagues</u> first and <u>friends</u> second, and the former is the principal framework of our relationship.

Another similar distinction may help, as between "friendships" and "relationships". It seems to me that what really counts are the <u>relationships</u> we develop in the workplace. These are special kinds of <u>friendships</u> that involve some critical kind of awareness of the strengths and weaknesses on both sides. While we may trust completely our friends to be non-evaluative of us, we cannot really treat each other so gently at work. The reason is that we also expect results from the people we have relationships with, and they from us. In our programs we stress the dual values of the 2Rs, <u>Results</u> and <u>Relationships</u>: if everything is about results, then we can short-circuit the human side of the organization and drive everyone so hard that we lose sight of their (and our own) personal needs. Of course, if everything is about relationships, then we become a country club, and no one is accountable to anyone for anything.

There is a rank seniority structure normally present in any organization. Of course, organizations will always exist as a means of accumulating expertise, exacting accountability, and attracting human and economic capital. In fact, the very nature of organizations implies some sort of rank structure in setting priorities and bringing experience to bear in solving problems. So I think we need to move beyond the concept of *friendship* and inquire into what do appropriate *relationship* behaviors look like in any given organization. Here is my short compendium of guidelines for appropriate business relationships:

- We recognize that all of us are working for the same organization, although perhaps in different parts of the business. Our job is to make the organization look good, not just our part of it. Therefore, our vision has to look beyond ourselves, and even beyond our own part of the business and ask, how can we help each other make our organization work better for ourselves and for our clients? If we strive to improve our relationships, especially across business lines, our organization will work better.
- Within our particular organizational structure, we recognize that an integral part of our job is to help others do their jobs, and that the basis of our relationships is how I can help you and how can you help me be better at what we do. If we just care for our own piece of the business and do our own job, that is not enough.
- We provide coaching and feedback to each other, regardless of rank, about how we impact each other and how we solve problems together and improve performance together. (See our article on the differences between "feedback" and "coaching" on this website.) A good test of our internal communication is to ask, Are we building relationships with it?
- The coaching and feedback is "honest" and "kind" at the same time, and we take into account our individual differences about how we give coaching and feedback so that it "lands" correctly on the other. This interpersonal care and sensitivity is at the heart of good relationships.

Other behaviors may be projected to protect positive relationships, but I believe that above all there must permeate an attitude, or climate, of support among executives, no matter what are the promotion or business "contest" or competitive outcomes among them. For example, I have a friend who was one of a biumverate of senior-level executives in a large corporation who were possible successors to the CEO. One was CFO and the other, my friend, was a Senior VP in charge of a large chunk of the business' operations. They both agreed to support each other no matter who was the chosen successor. My friend, the SVP, was not chosen. But he stayed on, and the new CEO favored him with greater independence in running what became a $3B part of the company. So they both won, in a way, and the company prospered. Usually what

happens in this case is that one person who wins the selection becomes the successor and the other leaves the company for, perhaps, a competitor, resulting in a loss for the organization as a whole.

A special case of this friendship/relationship trade-off happens in family organizations, where the connection is closer and perhaps more sensitive for participants. After all, what do you maximize with your children, spouse, and siblings, your family or your business relationships? The above-bulleted behaviors may help, but again it's a difficult trade-off. The most impressive examples I have seen are 2 family businesses, one in Central America and the other in Mexico. In both cases, the family members seem to have sorted out the business relationships and responsibilities so that the family members were less likely to bounce up against each other, AND they emphasized the importance of the success of the family business as a whole. With another client in Texas, the outcome was not so favorable, and the family partners kept conflicting with each other on ownership and control. The sad result was the divorce of the (married) principals and the departure of one of the sons from the business.

Another special case of this friendship/relationship trade-off happens in a country-club kind of environment, when the primary role of members is friendship, not business relationships. I belong to a car club where it is difficult to get members to run against each other for officer positions. Their relationship as friends, for which they joined the club, generally overpowers their need for position, particularly since there is no economic payoff anyway in doing so. However, even in the case of committee positions, where election results do not dilute the possible personal conflict, the polite move is not to go for any position when one perceives that someone else wants it. In this case, most of us want to conserve our friendships more than to take on a position that puts our primacy above that of another member.

So the above paragraphs may serve to frame the extremes for the balance between Results and Relationships – from the corporate world where Results are primary and are the driving force behind competitive marketplace survival; to the country or car club, where Relationships reign supreme and the only economic driving force is that the club survive and continue to function, i.e. stay open. Since most of our program participants reside in larger (civilian) corporations, I continue below on the conundrum of the best balance between Results and Relationships in that large corporate framework.

At TEAM International, our experience with executives puts them on the left of center on this balance, in favor of Results. In everyday terms, the drive is to set priorities and solve problems "objectively", without much regard to the Relationships involved. I frequently quote one of our participants in Spain from the Iberian subsidiary of a large multinational, who on the second day of our program announced his inspired learning up to that point: "Ah, so what you're telling us is that we ought to treat people <u>as if they mattered</u>…" Sí, Señor, I think you've got it! Relationships are important!

In Myers-Briggs terms, on average some 75% of our executives in Latin America are TJs, Thinking Judgers: logical, rational decision-makers and priority-setters, solve the technical problem, get it done, and <u>Next!</u> Never mind the People, that's not the Problem….! So we spend a lot of time in any given leadership development program emphasizing that it is precisely the people who are implementing any given decision or set of priorities who have to be attended to, their thoughts and feelings, that

determine how problems are solved and operations are carried out. This is at the core of "follower-oriented" or "customer-centered" leadership!

So back to the bullet-points highlighted above: I think that in summary the principle is: Your work is part of my work, and the quality of our <u>Relationships</u> determine how we can bring our joint talents to bear in solving problems, setting priorities and achieving <u>Results</u>. That may be a gross simplification, but sometimes the most complex problems have "simple" solutions….

~T. Noel Osborn, Ph.D.