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Employing a Friend or a Relative

I've been involved in giving jobs to people most of my working life. On many occasions I've given jobs to people I know, sometimes close friends, sometimes friends of friends, sometimes even family. The upside of course is that you know a bit about who you're offering a job to. The downside is when something goes wrong. Often it's been a great success; but there have also been too many times when it's ended in disaster

Some years ago I employed a member of the church I belonged to at the time. Turned out he had an anger problem. It came to a head when he took against a fellow member of staff and I had to sack him on the spot, when she threatened to go to the police. Another time, I gave a job to a friend who turned out to be completely unable to take orders. I've employed close family members with varying levels of success, but we won't linger there.

So how can you avoid the mistakes that I've made on so many occasions? Here are some of the lessons I wish I'd learned sooner.

1. Don't start a conversation about hiring if saying *no* isn't an option. Ask yourself, "If I open the question about hiring this person, can I imagine myself saying, 'I'm not giving you the job'?" If you can't, you're doomed at the outset. If you wouldn't say no — because of your own insecurity or your doubts about the emotional maturity of your friend — if no was the right answer, don't even consider becoming this person's boss. Otherwise, you will rationalise or cower yourself into a yes that you'll probably regret. If you can't turn your friend down for the job, you'll never be able to manage them once they're on your team. If your friend has already opened the question, shut it down honestly. Say, "I don't think I'm strong enough to do what it takes to be both your boss and your friend." You may have to deal with some resentment, but if they do *resent* you, then they'd be the kind of person who would *despise* you when things cratered.

2. Give yourself a get out. If you decide to entertain the possibility, set proper emotional expectations by explaining that no is the likeliest result. If the other person's hopes begin to gallop at the prospect of being hired, you've lost already. Don't conspire in their choice to set their expectations high. Say something like, "I can see some advantages to working together. And yet I think there are more reasons it won't work than reasons it will. I'd like to explore the possibility with you, but I want to be clear I think it might not be a good idea."

3. Rehearse the boundaries. Don't fool yourself into thinking that being a good friend is a good predictor of being a good employee. Someone who is congenial as a friend can show up as lazy, petty, resentful, dishonest, or even political as a colleague. Let's face it, you occasionally show up in some of those ways as well. Before you explore the candidate's qualifications, give yourselves a chance to mutually consider how you'll deal with some difficult situations. For example, ask your friend how they will feel when:

- You override a decision they made.
- You give them a negative performance review.
- You disagree with them publicly.
- They disagree with you publicly.
- You press them to achieve an uncomfortable goal or deadline.
- You give a plum assignment they wanted to someone else.
- You deny them a raise.

Rehearsing these scenarios helps the two of you think through some of the challenges you might face in your new relationship. This helps both parties set the psychological boundaries you'll need if you're to be a boss rather than a buddy. If you can't imagine yourself holding these boundaries, then don't proceed. In fact, doing so would mean, in essence, agreeing you will subordinate your duty to your company to the interests of your friend. You've sold out before you even begin.

4. Friendships in a Consultancy: I once had a related experience. I was hired as a consultant to evaluate the performance of a senior executive who was also a dear friend. The board of his company had concerns with him and wanted me to make recommendations to improve the situation. The board knew of our friendship but pressed me to take the project anyway. Having learned from my early experience, I let the board know that "no" was an option for me. I told them I wanted to talk to my friend before giving them an answer.

I began our lengthy lunch conversation by giving myself a get out. I let him know that this evaluation was going to happen whether I did it or not and that, if I took it on, the fact that I cared about him could not influence my conclusions. And yet I assured him I would decline the request if he preferred another consultant or felt this would jeopardise our relationship.

In an attempt to rehearse the boundaries of this new relationship, I let him know there was a remote possibility that I would conclude the board should dismiss him. We discussed candidly how we might feel should this happen. In the end, he said, "I would rather have this done by someone I know who loves me than by someone whose judgment or motives I might doubt."

I accepted the assignment. As the project proceeded, it became terrifyingly clear that there was no retreating from the problems he had created. He had to go. I'd be less than honest if I didn't admit that I resisted the conclusion longer than I would have had he not been a friend. However, I was far less emotionally threatened by the conclusion because I had set the proper expectations with him. In fact, I count it an

honour to have been part of his dismissal. It gave me an opportunity to be part of ensuring not only a just outcome for the organisation but also a compassionate transition for him.

It has been a few years since his exit from the organisation, and I saw him recently at the wedding of a mutual friend. When we saw each other, what could have been a resentful avoidance was instead a comfortable, mutual embrace.

5. Summary: Where I can I try to get others alongside me when there's a possibility of employing someone who is known to me or even a family member. Let someone who can be more objective take the strain. And if you do work with a family member and things start to go wrong, then you do need to find someone else to step in and take over.

I do need to declare that one of my close colleagues is the daughter of very close friends. My friends and I take care to keep this fact right outside our relationship; and we avoid the temptation of drawing them in if we're having problems working with each other. (I'm glad to say that it was one of my better decisions to take the risk - it's already paid enormous dividends and will go on doing so.

Hiring friends is risky. But if approached correctly, you can avoid threatening the relationship, and possibly even enrich and strengthen it.

My thanks for much of this material to Joseph Grenny cofounder of VitalSmarts, corporate training and leadership development. (The 'Friendships' story is his, though I've had similar experiences.)

Daryl Martin – August 2018

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Advice For the Voluntary Sector CIC

Sovereign Centre, Poplars, Yapton Lane, Walberton, West Sussex BN18 0AS.

Tel: 0845 3198330 - Email: support@afvs.org.uk – Web: www.afvs.org.uk