

WHEN YOUR FRIEND BECOMES YOUR BOSS



Navigating the change in relationship wrought by a promotion requires the best possible thinking. “Do’s” and “don’ts” come down to one basic approach: be a better friend than ever – for mutual benefit.

Sandy could hear angry voices all the way down the hall. Allen, the business unit leader, was going at it with Charlotte, one of his direct reports. Just before Sandy got to the door of Allen’s office, there was a final torrent of words, and Charlotte burst out.

Sandy hesitated. Obviously, this was no time to ask Allen about the issue on her mind, and she thought about tactfully retracing her steps. But she caught the nervous glances of the admins who couldn’t help but overhear too much of the heated exchange. So Sandy put aside her own concerns, put a soft smile on her face and stepped into Allen’s office.

He was clearly agitated. His face was red; veins stood out at his temples as he glanced up. “Let’s go for a walk,” Sandy suggested, holding out Allen’s jacket.

At first, Sandy simply matched Allen’s quick steps and stayed silent as he continued to rant. By chance as they left the office, a partial eclipse of the sun began. After a couple of blocks, Sandy pointed to the shadows made by a tree on the pavement. “Look, Allen,” she said. “There’s a notch in every ‘dapple’ on the ground; that’s the pattern made by the eclipse. It looks like a million crescent moons splayed across the sidewalk.” Allen was diverted. As his attention turned, his steps slowed; his breath evened out; his tone changed. Sandy and he continued to walk for another 20 minutes or so, talking about general things, before returning to the office calm and re-focused.

What gave Sandy the liberty to intervene with Allen in that way? Allen had recently become her boss, but they’d been friends for several years. They’d been hired at the same level, just a few months apart, into a culture rife with cliques. For more than three years, they’d enjoyed lunches in which they’d solved all the problems of the company, if not the world; had dinner at each other’s homes with their respective mates; laughed and philosophized; argued and reconciled.

But when Allen was promoted, he became Sandy’s boss. And the two friends had to find a new balance. Navigating this sort of change demands the best possible thinking on both sides.

First, it’s vital to take stock of all that you’re feeling. Of course, you’re bound to feel proud and pleased for your friend. And perhaps you see advantages for yourself – you may enjoy the ride forward, even upward, in your friend’s “draft”—like a bicycle racer who gets a lift by staying “on the wheel” of the leader.

But don't be surprised if other, all-too-human emotions are present, as well. Such as jealousy ("why him and not me?"), self-pity ("now who can I share my frustrations with?"), embarrassment ("oops—wish I hadn't said those terrible things about the company), anxiety ("wish my new boss didn't know about all the skeletons in my closet"). Stay aware of the flux in your feelings, knowing that doing or saying something from a low frame of mind might have long-lasting reverberations. At the same time, your pal may well be going through her own emotional rollercoaster — from elation at "winning" to terror of the "now what?" variety. Interacting with your old friend/new boss from a low mood can easily provoke a strong response in either of you — if for no other reason than the fact that your respective feelings may not be in synch.

Awareness of the impact of mood can help you focus on what it takes to build an even stronger working relationship on the foundation of your existing friendship. In doing so, a handful of "dos and don'ts" make common sense:

Don't...

- ...expect too much. Things can't be the same. Your friend now faces new problems and pressures, demands and decisions. Don't take offense when he can't tell you everything. And take your lumps if he comes down hard on you — if only to show that he isn't "playing favorites."
- ...act too smart for your own good. We all like to have an inside track, to be "in the know" about things. But resist the temptation to think you can tell others what the boss thinks, based on your past history, or to spill anything you've heard from him. Assume that *everything* he says, or has said in the past, is confidential.
- ...let others use you. In the inevitable jockeying within the new management structure, colleagues may want to get something across to the boss without putting their "fingerprints" on it. Encourage your co-workers to stand on his/her own knowledge and abilities to and help your boss build a team in which performance trumps politics.

Do...

- ...respect position. In order to maintain the privilege of openness with your old friend in private, be sure to show appropriate deference in public. For example, during meetings involving others, refrain from familiar banter with or no-holds-barred challenges to your boss.
- ...be a good "wing man." Look for places your pal/boss could use some support. In meetings, for example, ask questions and insert comments that help sustain a productive tone.
- ...step up, yourself. Now's your chance to show that you can handle a greater share of responsibility and leadership. Be proactive; take initiative. After all, you now know that your boss is on your side!

The bottom line is that even though you're dealing with an externally-driven change, the most important response has to do with your own, inner game. The required shift is mental: get your ego out of the way by paying attention to what you're thinking and what actions you take based on that thinking. Notice your assumptions – about what your friend could/should do, about what's going to happen to you. Sort out your emotions. In particular, try to see the new office landscape from the perspective of your old friend/new boss. No matter how much she (or you, for that matter) wanted the new role and prepared for it, promotion brings a host of surprises. Not all of them are pleasant.

The two of you may have, in the earlier incarnation of your friendship, talked about what you'd do if you "ruled the world." But there's a chasm between critiquing a boss's performance and actually shouldering primary accountability. Your friend is now on the high wire above that chasm, facing alone pressures you can't see. And you're uniquely able to help her *because* you know her insecurities and weaknesses.

Whatever your friend's job was before, as boss her #1 task now is to sustain a positive tone so that everyone can do his or her best work. Nobody can sustain positive tone if they're feeling insecure. Use your special history to help your new boss keep her bearings. Be, like Sandy whom we met at the start of this article, a safety valve – the "vault" where the boss can vent, the unflappable sounding board, the one who can be counted on to set aside your own agenda. Haul the boss out from under the mound of work on her desk from time to time. Even a few minutes' conversation about non-work things or a couple of laughs offer the greatest possible support: the kind of "lightening up" that helps the boss regain her bearings, keep her thinking clear. In short, now is the time to be a better friend than ever.

Come to think of it – that's so even if your new boss *isn't* an old pal!

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