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That's What Friends are For

December 11, 2018 | By Stephanie Theessen
Workforce Development

Remember in kindergarten, sitting next to your buddy on the carpet squares? Eating goldfish with a friend at snack time? Running around the playground with whoever seemed fun? There was plenty of time for friends. Of course, making friends gets tougher as we get older, but as the old adage says, "Everything I ever needed to know, I learned in kindergarten," and one of the most important things we all learned was, "be a good friend!"

As adults, friends are just as important to our health and well-being as they were when we were children. Not only in our personal lives, but also in our work lives, friendships are vital. When we take the time to invest in people at work, we reap dividends—personally and in the quality of our work.

The Power of Friendships at Work

Many of us devote a lot of time to our family and friend relationships outside of work, and rightly so. But work relationships deserve our attention, too. After all, many of us spend eight or more hours a day with our colleagues. This is most of our day! We benefit in wonderful ways when we spend time building friendships with the people around us in the office.

According to the Harvard Business Review, employees with a good friend at work have increased levels of:

- Happiness
- Health
- Belonging
- Engagement

As someone who works mostly from home, I see the difference between a day at home and a day in the office. When I work in the office, I tend to have more energy, a brighter outlook, and more engaged conversation with colleagues (instead of the dog). While there are many pros to a flexible schedule, I benefit greatly from my time in the office interacting face to face with colleagues.

People who have a good friend at work are also more satisfied with their jobs. It seems that being a good friend—taking an interest in someone, being positive, being compassionate—has the indirect result of a more relaxed, more fun, and less

stressful workplace.

And we as employees are not the only ones to benefit from close friendships. Our institution and companies do, too. Having a friend at work makes you healthier so you're out for sick days less often, more engaged in your work, and more productive.

Barriers to Friendships at Work

Only the Grinch would disagree with the idea that friendship is good. So what keeps us from making at least one good friend at work?

Partly, it's the American way. By virtue of living and working in the United States, we tend to emphasize productivity and autonomy and de-emphasize collaboration and community.

We also tend to work more...which you think would lead to more time to make friends with coworkers, but because of the additional time we spend working, we're crunched for time with family or for doing hobbies, and as a result, we don't invest in work friendships.

Here are some of the most common barriers to friendship at work. Knowing what prevents you from having closer relationships at work is half the battle.

- Time - *Too busy!*
- Motivation - *I don't feel like making friends.*
- Other commitments - *I have a lot to do outside of work.*
- Insecurities - *I'm not sure that I can trust that person, or I'm afraid they won't like me.*
- Different roles - *That person is my boss/direct report/competitor; how can we be friends?*

What is your biggest barrier? Consider different strategies for overcoming these barriers, and put your strategies into action. Use the practical steps below as inspiration.

Practical Steps to Creating Closer Friendships with Colleagues

It's not realistic to think everyone will have a best friend at work. But it is positive, beneficial, and life-affirming to consider how you might strengthen your friendships at work and create a brighter workplace for yourself and your coworkers.

Trent McMahon and Amy Dalrymple, content editors and relationship-builders in the Institute, began doing simple activities for their team to bring some positive vibes to the office. Their manager noticed their efforts were bringing the team together and asked them to extend their efforts to the whole department. As Trent says, their Fun Friday activities are "a great team-building strategy that brings everyone together and livens up the workplace!"

Take a cue from their example, and consider some practical steps you can take to invest in your colleagues.

- Make the first move. Be the first one to extend yourself in conversation or concern.
- Pay attention to what people share about their lives, and then take an interest.
- Ask someone to eat lunch together.
- Set up a happy hour.
- Express gratitude when someone helps you out.
- Instead of answering, "fine," when someone asks how you are, tell them something real—good or bad—that's going on.
- Put the values of empathy, authenticity, and vulnerability first. Having those three values in mind as we interact with colleagues goes a long way in increasing the positive atmosphere.

As the esteemed Franklin University faculty coach and mentor, the late Tracy Austin said, "So many people gave to me. People gave to *me*. Just have a positive influence on someone's life and pay it forward." People gave their friendship to Tracy, and he paid it forward by making a difference in so many people's lives through his investment in them. Take an interest in someone's life at work today—you won't regret it.

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