The Challenges of Managing Friends & Former Peers

By Gary Winters

“What’s it going to be like, supervising a couple of close friends and your former colleagues?” asked Dianne.

The promotion had been a long time coming. Samantha had worked hard honing her technical skills and proving her value to the organization, and one day, following a pair of tough interviews, she was given the news: she’d been promoted to supervisor of her department. She’d be replacing Len, who himself had been promoted to a managerial position.

She would start in a week.

Her pride was palpable as she shared the news with her family, and with friends outside the organization. Then, her friend Dianne asked, “What’s it going to be like, supervising a couple of close personal friends and all your now former colleagues?”

Yikes! Samantha hadn’t even thought of that yet.

There was Barb, whom she’d known for years, who was her closest friend (and co-conspirator at work, she laughed). They’d worked on many projects together, shared confidences about how the organization was run, and had each other’s back.

And now Samantha was supposed to be Barb’s boss? How was that going to work?

And there was Rich, another friend who had been a groomsman at Samantha’s wedding. He’d been a friend outside work for years. She was going to be his boss, too?

Samantha thought about the rest of the team. While she wasn’t personal “friends” with the others, they were all colleagues and peers and she had trouble imagining them as her “subordinates.” Some had far more technical experience, and at least one was also striving for a promotion and could easily be envious of Samantha’s success.

Becoming a supervisor was something that Samantha had worked toward for a long time and she believed she was well prepared. But she worried that this wrinkle – learning to manage friends and former peers – could be a landmine and derail her transition.
My book, *Managing Friends & Former Peers*, explores the issues and solutions surrounding the special dynamic of supervising people who are friends and colleagues. I call these folks “friendcos” (friends and/or co-workers).

It begins by being prepared with a plan (rather than hoping it will all just work itself out). The plan should include private, one-on-one conversations with all the friendcos on your new team to establish new ground rules, a team meeting to clarify how you’ll be treating *all* employees, and finding a way to acknowledge and celebrate the new beginning.

Questions Samantha (or any new supervisor) should ask herself before she talks with her friendcos include:

1. **What outcome (for the conversation) does she want to achieve? Possibilities include…**

   - Establishing her credibility
   - Reducing or eliminating the charge of favoritism
   - Modeling frank, open communication

2. **What does she want to say? It could include that…**

   - She’s serious about her new responsibilities
   - She has no apologies about taking the new position
   - She’ll be keeping a professional distance and spending less time with her friendcos
   - Her decisions going forward will be based on job performance, not any relationship she’s had with this person

3. **How should she say it? Here’s some suggestions…**

   - Find a time and place that’s private and comfortable
   - Begin by being clear on what you want to explore together
   - Be willing to self-disclose her own concerns, doubts and hopes to encourage candid participation
   - Be an active listener
   - Work together to create new agreements and ground rules.

There should be no difference between managing friends and former peers and managing anyone else, except that you should begin that supervision by establishing new ground rules for these unique relationships.

I encourage new supervisors not to fear supervising friendcos. Accept the challenge and frame it as an opportunity to become a strong, effective leader. As Stephen Covey has said, “Opposition is a natural part of life. Just as we develop our physical muscles by overcoming opposition – such as lifting weights – we develop our character muscles by overcoming challenges and adversity.”

Meeting the challenge of supervising friendcos is a powerful way to develop your leadership muscles.

*Gary Winters is a Centre consultant and the author of five books: To Do or Not To Do – How Successful Leaders Make Better Decisions, What Your Boss Never Told You – A Quick Start Guide*
for New Managers, Managing the Soon-to-Retire Employee, So, How Was Your Meeting, and Managing Friends and Former Peers. All are available on Amazon.com.