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Why trust in the workplace matters and how to cultivate it

By **Stefano Tasselli and Martin Kilduff**

Advancing your career depends on gaining the trust of others, and while nothing creates trust better than friendships between colleagues, the workplace presents unique challenges for these relationships. A recent study, explored here, reveals which personality traits are the best fit for creating trust in different friendship network configurations.

Most managers expect their employees to be discreet and neutral in how they interact with each other, particularly when they are from different departments. Insider information should be kept within the team loop and knowledge shared only with those who need it.

The formation of friendships between colleagues, however, brings a whole new dynamic to the workplace relationship. The obligations of friendship, such as openness and favouritism, now compete with organizational obligations for discretion and neutrality – and the successful balance of these forces is largely responsible for the preservation of the key attribute of these friendships: trust.

Friendships in the workplace are one of the most powerful assets an employee can have. Workplace friendships bring multiple benefits to all par-

ties, from increased productivity to better career prospects. Yet they are easily undermined by this conflicting demand for discretion and neutrality. How are these relationships best managed so that trust is preserved and enhanced? And what personalities undermine them?

In our research paper, *When Brokerage between Friendship Cliques Endangers Trust: A Personality-Network Fit Perspective*, we explore when and how trust is facilitated and preserved in workplace friendships. Our focus is on two different friendship network configurations within the workplace: those of employees who operate in a single friendship circle, and those whose friendships span two or more different friendship groups. What emerged from our research is that an employee's personality, in terms of self-monitoring and blurtatiousness, has a pow-

erful effect on the extent to which trust is preserved, and differs depending on the type of friendship network configuration employees operate in.

Friendships breed success

Colleagues who develop high-trust friendships in the workplace enjoy manifold career and performance benefits. Friendships give employees access to insider information; they facilitate workplace collaboration, and create opportunities for influence. Studies show that workplace friendships facilitate productivity, employee retention, job satisfaction, job involvement, team cohesion, and other positive outcomes including personal growth and emotional support. Simply put, friendships boost an employee's chances of success.

At the same time, business friendships are particularly difficult to manage. They operate in a context of competing obligations: that of the openness and honesty of friendship and that of the need for discretion and loyalty to work teams and managers. The work environment can easily undermine the trust within workplace friendships.

We can see the undermining effect of the workplace on trust most clearly when employees have friendships spanning two or more friendship groups or cliques. In the literature, we call these employees "brokers" between cliques, and they are understood to be faced with unique challenges. Each friendship group of which the broker is a part expects to be given priority when it comes to gossip and ▶

*"Friendships in the workplace are one of the **most powerful assets** an employee can have."*

Why trust in the workplace matters and how to cultivate it *(continued)*

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advice. Brokers must overcome the appearance of ambiguous loyalties. They run the risk of scepticism from others as to their motives. In each clique, the broker is expected to be honest and open, to share confidences, and to keep disclosures confidential.

So what determines whether or not an employee will successfully manage this potential for mistrust? A key question in our research is how people with different personality traits – specifically those of flexibility and verbal expressiveness – manage the potential mistrust inherent in multiple insider roles.

ker role require flexibility: someone who can adjust themselves to different people and situations. Individuals who demonstrate this ability (the high self-monitors) are best able to maintain trust within multiple groups. Individuals who fail to detect and adjust to different interpersonal needs within various groups are far more likely to lose trust.

Employees who are less flexible however (the low self-monitors) are more likely to win the trust of colleagues when the friendship structure involves a single clique. The expression of authentic attitudes

People high in blirtatiousness are easier to get to know – but they are also seen as more likely to share confidential information, and to fail to display discretion. Employees who are part of multiple friendship groups and who talk uninhibitedly about sensitive information quickly lose clique members' trust. Low blirters are more likely to be trusted with confidential information, therefore making them a better fit for the requirements of a brokerage role.

High blirters who are members of single cliques, on the other hand, have the opportunity to build trust through the transparency of their frequent communication with clique members. Their friends are likely to appreciate their spontaneity, and their tendency to speak their mind.

*“Friendship in a work setting is **incredibly important** both for an employee's personal growth and for their productivity.”*

To find out, we studied two groups: 126 young professionals and 75 hospital professionals. We discovered that to be trusted, your personality – and, more specifically, the extent to which you are flexible and verbally expressive – must match your position as either a broker or a member of a single friendship group.

Flexible brokers

People respond differently to the demands of being members of multiple cliques – and our research confirms that some people are a better fit for it than others. The demands of a bro-

and behaviours with little regard for impression management is regarded favourably within a single group of like-minded individuals.

Express less to win trust

Another measure of an employee's fit as a broker is the extent to which they are verbally expressive. Some people tend to express themselves as soon as a thought occurs to them, communicating thoughts, feelings and attitudes immediately and without filtering. We call these individuals “high blirters”, while low blirters are slower and more inhibited when responding to others.

Investing in building trust

Our research shows that individuals whose friendships span cliques are likely to be trusted to the extent that they exhibit a diplomatic personality style that combines a flexible presentation of themselves with a cautious revelation of their beliefs, attitudes and feelings. For employees whose friendships are within a single clique, competing pressures are less evident. But a personality style that combines low self-monitoring and high blirtatiousness is most likely to win colleagues' trust in a non-broker friendship network.

Friendship in a work setting is incredibly important both for an employee's personal growth and for their productivity. These friendships are par-



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particularly demanding, however, with friendship obligations likely to conflict with the organizational norms of discretion and neutrality – and nowhere more so than for employees whose friendships are across more than one friendship group.

Managers would do well to keep in mind, however, the potentially important role of these “friendship brokers” in an organization. Among the many advantages they offer is their potential to bring different departments or teams closer together and to increase knowledge sharing, which also stimulates innovation. Management should therefore encourage individuals who operate as “brokers” through

shout-outs at department meetings and commendations during performance evaluations.

As for individuals who operate as friendship brokers – they should be aware that being a diplomat and a go-between comes with a certain degree of risk. If they do not have the versatility of personality required to match the role and cannot be discreet and careful with their words, they may end up being the object of distrust across multiple groups. ■

This article draws its inspiration from the paper *When Brokerage between Friendship Cliques Endangers Trust: A Personality-Network Fit Perspective*, written by Stefano Tasselli and

► RSM Expertise

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