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### How friendly is too friendly?

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# HOW FRIENDLY IS TOO FRIENDLY?

Should bosses be chummy with their subordinates or keep their distance?

MANOJ THULASIDAS

WE ALL want to be the boss some day. Or at least, some of us want to be the big boss at some, hopefully not-too-distant, future.

It's good to be the boss. However, you need credentials, maturity, technical expertise, people skills, communication and articulation, not to mention charisma and connections to make it.

But being a boss is tough and being a good boss is a tricky balancing act. One issue many bosses face is: How friendly can they become with their team?

At first glance, this question may seem silly. Subordinates are human beings too, worthy of as much friendliness as anyone else. So, why be stuck up and act all bossy towards them?

The reason is that friendship erodes the formal respect that is a pre-requisite for efficient people management.

For example, how can you, the boss, be upset when your friends show up 30 minutes late for a meeting? After all, you wouldn't get worked up if they showed up a bit late for a dinner party.

If you are friendly with your staff and too good a boss to them, then you ironically become a bad boss – from upper management's perspective.

However, if you aspire to be seen as a powerful and efficient boss – in the eyes of upper management – then you have to be unfriendly with your subordinates. This is the boss's dilemma.

From the employee's perspective, if the boss is too friendly with them, it



YEN YOK

is usually bad news. The reason is simple – the boss will have their handphone number! And an excuse to call whenever the need arises.

Another unfortunate consequence of accidental cordiality is unrealistic expectations from employees.

They may not necessarily expect a fat bonus despite a shoddy performance just because their boss is a friend. But

they would be a better human being than most if they could be completely innocent of such wishful thinking. And this tinge of hope will lead to disappointment because if the boss is friendly with one employee, he is likely to be friendly with all staff.

By and large, bosses here seem to work best when there is a some distance between them and their subordinates.

One way they maintain the distance is by exploiting any cultural difference that may exist.

If you are a Singaporean boss, for instance, and your staff are all expatriate Indians or Chinese, it may be a good thing from the distance angle – cultural and linguistic differences can act as a natural barrier towards unwarranted familiarity that may breed contempt.

This immunity against familiarity, whether natural or cultivated, is probably behind the success of our past colonial masters. Its vestiges can still be seen in management here.

The attitude modulation when it comes to the right amount of friendship is not a prerogative of the bosses alone. The staff have a say in it too.

As a minor boss, I am genuinely interested in the well-being of those who report directly to me, especially because I work closely with them. I have had staff who liked that attitude and those who became uncomfortable with it.

The ability to judge the right professional distance can be a great asset in your team's productivity.

However, it cannot be governed by a set of rules. Most of the time, it has to be played by ear and modified in response to different attitudes and situations. That's why being a good boss is an art, not an exact science.

*The writer is a scientist from the European Organisation for Nuclear Research. He currently works as senior quantitative developer at Standard Chartered Bank, Singapore. His internationally acclaimed book, *The Unreal Universe*, is available in local bookshops and from [www.TheUnrealUniverse.com](http://www.TheUnrealUniverse.com).*