

**Topic:** Friendly But Not Friends: How to build supportive supervisor-employee relationships without crossing the line

**Context:** The hospitality industry is unique from other industries in its characteristics, which include long and unusual hours (Carty, 2016), a high-stress labor intensive environment (Dedeoğlu et al., 2024), and team-oriented nature of work (Maier, 2008) which all present their own challenges. Within the environment of the experience industry, it is easy for one to want to have companions and confidants along the way to cope with and accompany them through the industry's unique challenges to feel connected and not alone. The human need for friendship is in our very nature, and it is natural to want to find companionship, support, and protection, especially in high-stress environments (Morrison & Cooper-Thomas, 2016). However, with this need comes challenges, and lines become blurred in the workplace when friendships start to cloud judgment and break the lines between personal and professional (Korn, 2021).

How different demographics within the workforce view friendships has a crucial impact on the dynamic of these relationships. An article from AARP.org (n.d.) talks about how the Baby Boomer generation values sharing life experiences and activities within their friendships. Meanwhile, Generation X relies more on friends to help them solve problems. Millennials take on the outlook of friendships being a healthy part of everyday life and a way to feel valued (American Association of Retired Persons, n.d.). When looking even further into these younger generations it can be seen that they are much more willing to be open in friendship spaces with 52% of Millennials and 48% of Generation X saying that they “don’t hide anything from their friends” (American Association of Retired Persons, n.d., para. 9). In regards to Generation Z, they have a more challenging time making friends. The generation is also much more likely to end friendships, at times, without saying anything to the other person (Kato, 2024). All of these

factors span throughout every industry and can cause confusion and misunderstandings regarding friendships. Due to the fact that the hospitality industry specifically deals with employees of all ages and backgrounds, it can be challenging to navigate the friendships between these various demographic groups without adverse outcomes, whether they are negative or positive. One strategy for dealing with friendship conflict in the workplace is to avoid gossiping and venting in the workplace altogether (Gallo, 2022). The idea is that side conversations and interpersonal sharing can and will lead to conflict (Gallo, 2022) however, in the context of the hospitality industry a level of control would have to be enacted so far to the extent that employees would no longer have autonomy over their own actions at work for this strategy to work. This poses the question, how can the problems that workplace friendships present be prevented without management essentially taking on the role of dictator or tyrant in the workplace?

Additionally, the problem within the workplace arises when employees who used to be on the same level of the hierarchy are now at odds in their positions. This occurs when one employee is promoted to a management position over the other, thus creating a power dynamic that is not contingent on a friendship environment. We can take the context of two banquet workers who have been friends and working together for multiple years. When one of these workers gets promoted to banquet captain and their friend gets to the banquet set up an hour late after a night drinking at the bar together, the friend who is the banquet captain now has to write up their friend due to their responsibilities as a manager. The power dynamic of these roles is explained by Willemyns et al. through the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), showing how subordinates change when communicating with their superior in the workforce and vice versa (2003). This is done through multiple different strategies, such as discourse management, which states that “Higher-status individuals are more likely than their lower-status



different categories of boundary work, the approach boundary-setting method ranked highest in complete success (Trefalt, 2013, p. 1815). In the approach boundary setting method “the substantive goal of setting the desired boundaries was achieved by joining forces with others” (Trefalt, 2013, p. 1812). This entails being upfront with coworkers in the most honest way possible while also trying to provide solutions or alternatives to the crossing of a boundary in a work setting. In doing so, the outcome has shown a more positive experience in work relationships and a healthier way of communicating to avoid conflict or be better equipped to resolve it when it does occur.

The approach boundary-setting initiative would be applied through employee and employer training. HR professionals have stated that training sessions and team-building experiences create work friendships that cultivate both workers rather than bring them down (Maurer, 2024). Training sessions that follow the approach boundary setting guidelines and focus will benefit both the employee and the supervisors and give structure and strong support to otherwise inadequate training methods. As Shasta Nelson, an expert on how workplace friendships can positively affect workers, stated, “You solve personal relationship problems not by avoiding friendship but by teaching and training how to build healthy relationships” (Maurer, 2024, para. 14). The implementation of these training sessions would divulge into the broad scope of how to approach and set boundaries in workplace relationships confidently, what can influence friendships that are too friendly, how to redirect a conversation that is steering too close for comfort, equipping employees with the tools to provide solid alternatives and stand firm in their approach, and real-life scenarios for the employees to practice what they have just learned. If it ever gets to a point where an employee feels that they are too friendly with their coworker and are uncomfortable to say anything, then this training session would help to

mitigate the employee’s stress and potentially shine a light on how to navigate through it by using the approach method of identifying limits, vocalizing them, being assertive, and providing space to be open in that relationships to hear and provide resolutions. Once companies see that their employees are able to differentiate themselves from their work life and their home life, approach boundary-setting head-on, and realize their limits while vocalizing them, supervisors will know they have successfully implemented the training session’s teachings.

The training will be implemented through the following steps in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2 Description of Training Process

<b>Training Steps</b>	<b>Description of Process</b>
<b>Step 1:</b> Select candidates to facilitate training	The selection of HR employees to facilitate the training sessions is a crucial first step in the process. Management and executives will decide who will take on this role and whether additional hiring needs to be made based on the size of the company and the workload of the HR staff. These HR employees will then be trained and educated in boundary-setting methods to qualify them to give these training sessions.
<b>Step 2:</b> Schedule mandatory meetings to discuss and explain the new training protocol	Meetings will be scheduled and facilitated by management and HR staff who are in charge of the training. These meetings will be on company time and staff will get paid while in them. They will be 30 minutes long and an hour-long in-depth recap of the meeting will be sent out afterwards for staff to refer back to if they wish. Staff will not have to come in on their days off for the meetings if they do not wish to as they will be scheduled during peak slow times in the shift and employees will alternate so that every employee may attend. Employees who come to a meeting on their day off will be paid for it.
<b>Step 3:</b> Initiate group training sessions	The training sessions will be done in groups and start weekly for a month. To maximize

	<p>efficiency while still being effective the groups should range from 10-12 employees at a time. Each session will last an hours. There will be a sign-up for these groups that will be released the week prior and attendance to one session a week will be mandatory for all employees. These training sessions will be available during work hours and all employees will be paid while attending the sessions. Management will work together in scheduling and ensure enough employees are on shift and available while other employees are attending their training sessions.</p>
<p><b>Step 4: Follow up</b></p>	<p>Feedback will then be gathered from employees through anonymous polling and feedback forms to gauge the effectiveness of the training and spot weaknesses that need to be addressed in the protocol. After completing the initial four group sessions of these training employees will have access to schedule one-on-one meetings with an HR training professional if they feel they need more support, resources, or training on the approach boundary setting methods. These one-on-one meetings will also be on company time and paid even if the employee schedules on their day off.</p>
<p><b>Additional Information:</b></p>	<p>All new employees that enter the company after the protocol is initially started will have to complete four training sessions at one training session a week after their initial employee onboarding process. Due to this, training sessions will most likely be run all year unless there is a halting of new hiring of employees for a given period of time in which case group training sessions will not need to be held because all employees will have fulfilled the requirement of four initial group training sessions.</p>

To strengthen the training, the topics known as “The Four B’s,” Booze, Biden, Bitcoin, and Bible, will be added to the employee handbook and training sessions as topics to avoid

talking about while in stressful or unfit circumstances at work. These Four B's represent the suggested topics to avoid when trying to connect with coworkers and supervisors which include topics revolving around alcohol, personal stances on politics, matters surrounding money, or religious stances (VirtualVocations, 2023). These are sensitive topics that are peculiar to discuss at work; however, with the approach boundary method, these topics will not be off limits but rather have attention brought to them where conversations can be had while the approach to these conversations will surround employees' limits and boundaries as well as methods to facilitate productive and alternative topics as highlighted above. Postage around the workplace, majorly focused near break rooms, with these "Four B's" would remind employees about how to go about these conversations and provide support for the training initiative but will not be the main focus of the solution. A daily reminder in meetings, emails, and work-related relay of information for the first two weeks of the implementation of these solutions will help to inform employees of this new initiative and the benefits it will provide to them.

Additionally, after informing workers about these new guidelines, providing resources and initiatives that focus on work-life balance would benefit employees in not crossing any lines with their supervisors and not having to rely on the workplace for their social life or feeling burnt out by their professional relationships and lines that are being crossed. Outlining what could make a work-related relationship develop into an overbearing one would keep all employees and supervisors aware of what should be avoided, and to better maintain a healthy work-life balance, one needs to prioritize one's mental health and practice self-care (Sanfilippo, 2023). If one does not practice self-care consistently, it leads to worsening mental health, which affects the employee or supervisor's mood. This mood shift further affects the person's job performance and may prevent the employee from truly giving their time and dedication to their work. Along with

these changes, an employee might have a decline in their job satisfaction, leading to counterproductive behaviors (Hreha, 2024). Preventing this decline in mental health should be a priority of all companies within the hospitality industry. Companies can avoid mental health deterioration in their employees and supervisors by offering self-care opportunities like vouchers for local spas or a gym pass.

**Implementation and evaluation of the work context:** As mentioned in the context section of this report the hospitality industry contains many unique characteristics that provide challenges for employees and managers. The team-oriented nature of the industry specifically provides an environment for friendships to blossom, which presents difficulties over other industries such as the agricultural industry which is much more solitary and focused on individual processes and responsibilities (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2024). Looking towards another industry to emphasize the importance of professional distance and setting boundaries in workplace friendships we can look towards the healthcare industry which has very similar characteristics to those of hospitality. The healthcare industry experiences high “complexity, intangibility, heterogeneity and simultaneity” and in addition to this, the “delivery of quality healthcare services requires coordination among a number of different organizations and providers” (Mosadeghrad, 2014, para. 4). When speaking about the healthcare industry, Mental Health America states that setting boundaries in workplace relationships “prevents resentment from building” and prevents burnout in employees and managers alike (n.d., paras. 3-4). We can relate this to the hospitality industry with the similarities mentioned earlier and see that this is an essential issue for our industries given the context.

In regards to the feasibility of the solutions provided, the changes that are being looked at to be implemented are not massive tasks, but instead small differences in policy and procedure

that can immensely impact job satisfaction, commitment, and performance. Managers and employees in the hospitality industry have significant roles that do not provide an environment for deep friendships to occur without major problems. As mentioned before the roles of managers tend to take on behaviors such as “interrupting, dominating the conversation, controlling the choice of topic, and the use of directives” while employees are “less likely to use an informal tone or self-disclosure” (Willemyns et al., 2003, p. 119). This is due to their set roles and tasks especially in hospitality when the role of the manager is to coordinate teams, solve guests' issues, facilitate operational flow, and evaluate staff performance (Bika, 2023) and the role of the employee is to carry out orders from management while also having to think quickly and improves in uncommon situations.

**Outcome assessment:** Without proper boundaries set within the workforce when creating friendships with other co-workers or supervisors, there are bound to be complications among employees and in the partnership between employee and boss. The lines between what is socially acceptable to discuss during and after work hours become blurred. Additionally, a sense of obligation to respond to a work friend regarding work matters during after-work hours becomes incessantly more demanding and more complex to navigate. The work-family border theory makes this already slightly blurred line even more blurred. This theory highlights how borders are crucial to discuss since everyone’s perceived boundaries differ (Pedersen & Lewis, 2012). These differing opinions affect how a team works together and the dynamics between each other. As seen in unit 8, when groups have established norms, then the majority of the group will adhere to it, even if it is wrong. This way of thinking in groups can be applied to the dynamics that exist in a coworker relationship. If multiple people in the workforce believe that a topic is

not crossing any work-life balance boundaries, then it becomes the norm within that environment and could affect workers' mental health.

A worker's mental health plays a significant role in their performance, especially in our industry, which relies heavily on customer interactions. As the ERG theory discusses in its "existence" section, every human is more motivated to engage in work-related business when their necessities are met (*Alderfer's erg theory of motivation*, 2024). Once these needs are met, the worker's mood for the day at work affects the employee's job performance and how coworkers view that employee. Bringing a smile when interacting with customers becomes challenging without the ability to feel positive in life. As discussed in unit 5, some workers participate in deep acting to better serve the customers. This method enables the workers to bring out a genuine smile. Deep acting is when someone changes their expressions and emotions to portray that emotion more genuinely, compared to surface acting, which only modifies expressions with a fake smile. Deep acting and surface acting can be utilized when working with coworkers to get the job done more swiftly, but they can lack quality work. Additionally, if a worker goes to work daily feeling negative emotions because of a troubling friendship with someone who works in the same workplace, it affects their job satisfaction. Practicing deep acting makes it easier for workers to go through their shifts, but it becomes draining for them to keep up with appearances that do not accurately reflect their feelings or emotions.

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