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## Friendship Among Coworkers

Rachel L. Morrison and Helena D. Cooper-Thomas

### Why Are Coworker Friendships Important in Organizations?

Coworker friendships refer to the informal and voluntary relationships among employees in a workplace (Berman, West, & Richter, 2002). They are distinguished from other types of relationships at work by two aspects: that they are voluntary and holistic. Taking the first of these, friendships develop between coworkers because these individuals willingly put time and effort into the relationship, regardless of whether there is any formal requirement to interact to complete work (Sias, Smith, & Avdeyeva, 2003). Second, they are holistic, or what Sias and colleagues (2003) call *personalistic*. That is, in work friendships, coworkers recognize each other as a whole individual with an existence that encompasses activities outside of work, and not just as occupants of a work role.

Friendships between coworkers have been a focus of work psychology and management research in the past decade for two key reasons. First, from a humanistic perspective, workplaces offer a fascinating microcosm of society more broadly, although one where employees may have less choice in the relationships available to them. Second, taking a rational perspective, researchers are interested in the positive association that friendships have with desired employee attitudes such as job satisfaction and also organizational outcomes such as lower turnover (for example, Mao, 2006; Markiewicz, Devine, & Kausilas, 2000; Morrison, 2004, 2006, 2009b; Morrison & Cooper-Thomas,

2013; Nielsen, Jex, & Adams, 2000). According to Gallup research canvassing approximately 15 million employees the world over, approximately one-third of employees have a “best friend” at work (Rath & Harter, 2010). Employees with a best friend at work are seven times as likely to be engaged in their jobs; in addition they serve customers better, have higher well-being, are more productive, and are less likely to get injured on the job. On the other hand, just 8% of those who report not having close work friends are engaged in their jobs, with concomitantly poorer outcomes (Rath & Harter, 2010).

In line with these positive effects of friendship, other research reveals that workplace friendship is positively related to employees’ job satisfaction, creativity, job performance, job involvement, team cohesion, and organizational commitment; and is negatively associated with employees’ turnover intentions and negative emotions (Berman et al., 2002; Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008; Fliaster & Schloderer, 2010; Nielsen et al., 2000; Riordan & Griffeth, 1995; Winstead, 1986).

Although these findings are important for the advancement of research on workplace friendship in relation to employee outcomes, other researchers have noted that there is still a long way to go before we fully understand the factors that influence workplace friendships forming in the first place (Nielsen et al., 2000; Sias & Cahill, 1998). Cross-sectional research suggests that structural factors, for example seniority, are important, with higher-ranking employees reporting lower levels of friendship (Mao, 2006; Wright, 2009). Broader social aspects of the workplace (such as leadership, group affective climate, and opportunities for interaction) may also influence friendship formation (Korte & Lin, 2012; Tse, Dasborough, & Ashkanasy, 2008).

## Taxonomy, Definition, and Description

Below we outline current thinking into what coworker friendships are, and how they differ from other types of relationships, both inside and outside of organisations.

### Distinguishing Friendships From Other Relationships

Friendships are voluntary relationships that exist primarily for enjoyment and satisfaction rather than for the fulfillment of a particular function or role (Sapadin, 1988; Sias et al., 2003). Unlike many other relationships we have in our lives, friendships are uniquely voluntary (Adams & Blieszner, 1994). In fact, out of all of our relationships, we select only our friends and our partners. This compares with blood, legal, geographic, and task ties, which designate relatives, neighbors, and colleagues. Friendships generally develop incrementally because there is no formal boundary or ceremony to mark the beginning or end of a friendship, as there is for other relationships such as a marriage or a new job. Friendship relationships are voluntary, reciprocal relationships, which are seen as unique and special by the participants, and which usually enhance their lives.

### Friendship Versus Acquaintanceship

Interpersonal relationship literature, both empirical and theoretical, suggests that people distinguish between friendship and acquaintance relationships, and that different rules govern people's interactions in these two relationships. There are many different definitions of friendship, but almost all include facets of voluntariness (free choice), liking (affection), and reciprocity (mutuality). Acquaintances, on the other hand, are characterized primarily by social interactions and lack the intimacy, sense of uniqueness, degree of affection, and obligations associated with personal friendship (Bridge & Baxter, 1992). Wright (1988) distinguishes friendship from acquaintance relationship by

the additional behaviors that friends engage in with one another, including shared voluntary activities and intimacy such as self-disclosure and emotional support.

In earlier work, Wright (1974) was perhaps the first to incorporate the context in which friendships occur, but positioning it in the background. Specifically, he defines a friendship as a relationship involving voluntary interaction, in which “the commitment of the individuals to one another usually takes precedence over their commitment to the contexts in which the interaction takes place” (p. 94). Thus, when conceptualizing workplace friendships, Wright’s definition implies that the boundaries of genuine friendships supersede the work-role boundaries that may exist in a particular context. We discuss this idea in the next section.

### Workplace Friendship Versus Other Workplace Relationships

Some people believe that work is not the place to make friends. For others there are expectations that some (if not all) of their social needs will be met at work.

Notwithstanding these different beliefs, within any workplace most employees will have numerous types of relationships. These will include relationships with supervisors, subordinates, mentors, protégés, other employees, and even ongoing relationships with customers or clients. Unlike friendships, coworker relations are more likely to be exchange-based (i.e., instrumental rather than intrinsically rewarding); are subject to both the written and unwritten “rules” of the organization in which they exist; and are usually organized around explicit work-related objectives and responsibilities.

Friendships are also distinguished from other relationships at work by their development. Most workers have little or no input into the selection of coworkers, as opposed to friendships, which are voluntary and freely chosen (Sias & Cahill, 1998).

Moreover, many organizational relationships are formally defined, such as superior–subordinate or mentor–protégé, and therefore lack the distinguishing features of workplace friendships: they are not voluntary or reciprocal (Morrison, 2004). Finally, workplace relationships are instrumental; when employee A interacts with employee B to complete a task, employee A only cares about employee B insofar as employee B contributes to completing the task. Employee A would not be bothered if employee B were replaced by an equally proficient colleague. This contrasts with workplace friendships, where there is genuine concern and caring, with friends perceiving each other as unique and irreplaceable.

### Transition From Colleague to a Friend, and Back Again

Within developmental and social psychology there are numerous explanations as to why and how two people develop a close relationship. Theories of interpersonal attraction often focus on why individuals select any one person to become friendly with over the many others they have contact with. According to Rodin (1982), people will make relatively rapid assessments as to whether or not an acquaintance, or in this case a colleague, is a potential friend, and whether or not to “waste” energy on someone who is unsuitable for some reason (Rodin’s “dislike criteria”). Sometimes people will be excluded due to factors such as age, appearance, or gender—what Rodin called “disregard criteria,” which would put the coworker out of contention as a friend prior to even getting to know them at all. If a coworker is not excluded by either dislike or disregard criteria, then they can be considered a potential friend. However, unlike new acquaintances outside of the workplace, coworkers have a preexisting or concurrent relationship (that of colleague). This may motivate coworkers to initiate, or at least be

responsive to, a new friendship for work-related reasons, such as making their work more enjoyable or easier. Equally, it may motivate coworkers to avoid friendship attempts in order to maintain the work relationship as it is and avoid potential damage or costs that may stem from a closer relationship.

There are various reasons why individuals form friendships at work, and some of these may be simultaneous (Dotan, 2007, 2009). Motives can include (1) similarity—as a function of the dyad, where those with similar interests or values are more likely to become friends; (2) proximity, for example working closely on the same project, with proximity providing an opportunity to identify similarities, which then leads to attraction (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001); (3) instrumentality, in that individuals may seek out a relationship that will confer career advantages such as promotion or advancement; (4) seeking work safety and trust, for example having someone at work who will provide support and protection in difficult times; (5) seeking others who fulfill a “missing role,” such as having a mother or father figure at work; and (6) as a sanity check, to gain validation or confirmation in the way they are thinking or behaving (Weick, 1995).

These criteria may be used equally for choosing friends in work as in other contexts. However, the criteria may be enacted differently due to the dual nature of workplace friendships (i.e., the relationship is one where participants are both coworkers and friends). Proximity is facilitated by the work context, and therefore this is a key driver for coworker friendship, since we are “forced” to see our colleagues on most (if not all) work days. Similarity is also highly relevant, with opportunities to witness coworkers’ behaviors enabling the identification of similarities (McPherson et al., 2001).

Perhaps more importantly, we often work with others similar to ourselves: Organizations tend to select similar kinds of people, and in turn people who feel that they match well to the organization tend to stay (Schneider, 1987). Beyond working for the same organization, coworkers are likely to be in the same profession and have a similar educational background. Mutual attraction is also essential in the formation of friendships, that is, we like those who like us (Hays, 1985; Johnson, 1989) and this no doubt holds true in a workplace context. In a work context we are often in a position to work with, help, or be helped by, our colleagues (Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2011); instrumentality, reciprocity, and cooperation are all factors that can lead to friendships developing. Finally, trust is a key factor in genuine friendship (Fehr, 1996). It is possible that colleagues who have built trust in the preexisting collegial relationship will be relatively more likely to trust one another if and when their relationship develops into a friendship (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996; Sias & Cahill, 1998). The process of friendship evolution from peer to friend, then from friend to close friend, and finally from close friend to almost-best-friend was examined by Sias and Cahill (1998). They found each of these transitions to be associated with different types of communication; with intimacy, trust, and self-disclosure becoming more frequent as the relationships deepened.

As well as the individual, communication, and dyadic factors that influence if and how coworker friendships evolve, the workplace itself can either facilitate or hinder friendships simply through varying proximity. There has been a great deal of research indicating that people who work closely with each other are more likely to become friends (e.g., Athanasiou & Yoshioka, 1973; McPherson et al., 2001; Schutte & Light, 1978). Aspects of the workplace such as the physical layout, schedules, job routines, and

task interdependence influence how frequently people interact, and thus play a part in the formation of friendships. In addition, the culture or climate of an organization, and the behavioral norms of other employees will have a profound influence on whether or not employees have the opportunity to make friends (Nielsen et al., 2000). Organizations that enable physical proximity offer opportunities to identify similarities and build trust, and this in turn enhances friendships among coworkers. This can be facilitated by organizing social and team-building events or having a communal lunch room or relaxation areas and games rooms (Tse et al., 2008). This contrasts with organizations that provide no structures to support informal interaction, such as having policies that prohibit chatting informally with others during work time, or on off-work topics, those where employees eat off-site or at their desks, and that do not organize social events.

## Types of Organizational Relationships

Early research on organizational peer relationships identified three types, distinguishable by their degree of closeness (Kram & Isabella, 1985): information peer, collegial peer, and special peer. Most organizational relationships will be one of these peer types, with research showing them to be both discriminable and conceptually meaningful (Fritz, 1997). Of the organizational peer types, the *special peer* relates most closely to the definitions of friendship given in the section “Taxonomy, Definition, and Description.” A *special peer* would be what the Gallup studies refer to as a “best friend at work.” Special peer relationships take longer to develop than either collegial or information peer relationships and are relatively scarce in organizations, with many people having none, or only one, special peer at work (Fritz, 1997). The special peer is the most intimate of peer relationships and, within them, formal workplace roles are ignored or downplayed in



favor of high levels of self-disclosure and self-expression (Kram & Isabella, 1985; Sias & Cahill, 1998). For many, this prioritizing of one's friendship relationship over the work aspect of the relationship is what defines it as a genuine friendship. For example, a workplace "best friend" might disclose an upcoming restructure in spite of organizational requirements for secrecy. According to Sias and Cahill (1998), genuine friendships that may have been initiated in the workplace will, over time, grow out of that context, until eventually the members no longer see each other as workmates at all. Having to select *which* aspect of the dual relationship to honor is at the heart of the "dual role tension" (Bridge & Baxter, 1992) inherent in many coworker friendships. This is the focus of the next section.

## Coworker Friendship as a Dual Relationship

Much prior research (and indeed the definitions given earlier) tends to treat a friendship as a single relationship, independent of other relationships the friends may have. The notion that a work friend is, by definition, a "dual" relationship is fundamental in the study of coworker friendship. At the very least, a coworker friendship is one that comprises both a collegial relationship and a friendship; it *may* also include aspects of hierarchy (e.g., being friends with your boss, for example), aspects of family obligation (e.g., being friends with your coworker who is also your sister-in-law), or aspects of your neighborhood (e.g., being friends with a coworker who lives nearby). As well as the importance of context (i.e., the workplace) this "multiplex" (Methot, LePine, Podsakoff, & Christian, 2015) aspect of a workplace friendship is a key defining feature. It is crucial because it implies the need to simultaneously manage a professional, collegial relationship and an informal, personal one. For example, as a colleague, you may need to

pass a completed task to your workplace friend on a certain day. If you are late to work that day due to family issues and do not get the work handed over on time, as a colleague, your friend may be frustrated that your late arrival has negatively affected them.

However, as a friend, they may either understand, show concern and overlook this, or they may feel that in the friendship role you have an even greater responsibility to meet your obligation to them and hence they may feel doubly angry and betrayed by you.

There are several characteristics of dual- (or multi-) role relationships, such as workplace friendships, that distinguish them from single-role relationships, such as friendships. People in dual-role relationships have, in effect, to manage two relationships simultaneously that may have conflicting demands, as in the example above. Hence there is a need to balance the tensions arising from the dual-role relationship. Bridge and Baxter (1992) conducted a study examining the extent to which employees experience dilemmas or contradictions posed by the concurrent friendship and work-association components of their relationships at work. They identified five potentially incompatible demands associated with both the role of “friend” and of “work associate,” which are outlined here. These demands potentially create risks and tensions in coworker relationships.

*Instrumentality versus affection:* Friendship can enhance feelings of trust, believability, and acceptance of feedback. On the other hand, utilitarian support may create feelings of indebtedness, exploitation, or suspicion of another’s motives, thereby undermining the friendship. Reciprocity has been shown to be an important aspect of friendship, with a lack of reciprocity associated with negative affect (Buunk, Doosje, Jans, &

Hopstaken, 1993). A situation where one member of the dyad receives more benefits, (as in a relationship with an organizational superior, where one or the other in the relationship may provide more support, help, or assistance than the other) will create a lack of reciprocity and may cause tension for the dyad.

*Impartiality versus favoritism:* Organizational practices usually aim to provide equitable treatment for everyone with no personal bias. However, people usually expect their friends to display special treatment and favoritism, thereby indicating that they regard each other as unique and special. For example, an organizational friend may expect to learn first about upcoming new resources or opportunities before other work colleagues.

*Openness versus closedness:* Friends are expected to be fully open and honest with one another, trusting and displaying trustworthiness. However, professional confidentiality practices may mean that close friends refrain from full disclosure. Similarly, disclosing work-related information from a friend may violate that friend's expectation of confidentiality.

*Judgment versus acceptance:* Friendship is built on an expectation of mutual affirmation and acceptance. Indeed coworkers may be ideal sources of empathy regarding work-related angst. However work associates may find themselves in conflict because of competing interests associated with their work roles, for example disagreeing on the best process for a task or competing over a resource such as a training opportunity, or because of a performance evaluation process.

*Autonomy versus connection:* The sheer proximity afforded by the workplace facilitates interpersonal attraction between people. Hiring practices are generally biased toward hiring similar kinds of people to those already in place (Schneider, 1987). Thus, it is likely that employees perceive themselves as similar to others, which in turn facilitates friendship development and maintenance. However, daily contact with the other person may provide too little autonomy or separation, thereby jeopardizing the friendship (Bridge & Baxter, 1992).

Each facet—colleague, friend, mentor, and so on—in a dual-role friendship has potential consequences for the other. Because of this, employees will often need to prioritize one relationship over the other, either in a particular situation or continually. For example, an employee with a coworker friend may cancel on the friend to catch up with work, which might have negative consequences on the friendship. Alternatively, the employee may stop working entirely for the afternoon in order to comfort their distressed colleague, which would have an obvious impact on their work.

Thus, although close friendships at work have predominantly positive consequences, such as increased commitment and satisfaction with work (Morrison, 2004; Nielsen et al., 2000; Winstead, Derlega, Montgomery, & Pilkington, 1995), and improved communication and information sharing (Kram & Isabella, 1985; Sias & Cahill, 1998), there is the ever-present possibility that the dual tensions of maintaining friendships with colleagues will result in stress and conflict.

A final way that the dual nature of workplace friendships relates to the experiences of coworker friends is what can happen when and if the relationship turns

“sour.” Indeed, the added tension and demands inherent in the dual relationships experienced by workplace friends might make these types of friendship more likely to break down compared with others. Coworker friendship breakdowns are discussed in the following section.

## Friendship Deterioration

Given that the complexity in managing coworker relationships means that they are, at times, comparatively more difficult to manage and maintain, these relationships can and do occasionally turn sour. It is important to consider workplace friendship deterioration because, as discussed previously, friends have been shown to enhance and enrich employees’ experience of work through things like social support (Kram & Isabella, 1985; Sias & Cahill, 1998) and engagement (Rath & Harter, 2010). Thus, losing a friend means also losing this source of support and enjoyment (Sias, Heath, Perry, Silva, & Fix, 2004). The consequence of terminating a friendship at work is potentially greater than outside the workplace context, however, as the friendship breakdown is likely to negatively impact on any ongoing, professional relationship between the former friends. Unlike a friendship relationship outside of work (where the participants may seldom need to see one another again), employees may be “forced” to continue to work together after a relationship breakdown. Alternatively the impact may be that one or both parties leave the organization because they feel compelled to do so, which may hinder their careers.

In addition to the dialectical tensions outlined already, research on workplace friendship deterioration (Sias, 2006; Sias et al., 2004) suggests that many of the same factors that lead to friendships being initiated (e.g., proximity, trust, mutual liking, and similarity) can also be the reasons that the friendship deteriorates. For example, the loss

of proximity (perhaps being transferred to another department within the organization) can lead to the deterioration of a friendship (Rawlins, 1994, cited in Sias et al., 2004). In addition, as the friends get to know one another better, they may discover personality traits, attitudes, and behaviors that are too dissimilar to their own, which will decrease the closeness of the relationship (Duck, 1982). Finally, just as trust is the foundation of close relationships, feeling betrayed or being lied to has destroyed many friendships (Fehr, 1996), and may have the same effect in the workplace.

## Gender and Organizational Relationships

Gender has a potential impact on almost all experiences of work, from position in the organizational hierarchy, to work values and behaviors, to salary and role (Winstead & Morganson, 2009). In many cases however, workplace friendships have been studied with little or no attention paid to the impact that the gender of the participants may have. In fact, when gender is included in research, it is often as a covariate; something to be statistically controlled for rather than explored (Winstead & Streets, 2013).

Before outlining gender differences, it is worth noting that friendship relationships for men and women are similar in many respects (Wright, 1988), and there are large variations *within* the genders in terms of their behavior in friendships (Walker, 1994). Notwithstanding these similarities, there have been consistent findings in both the social psychology and organizational psychology literatures of gender differences in friendships. Women's friendships have been described as communal, and tend to involve more self-disclosure, supportiveness, and complexity than do friendships between men (Markiewicz et al., 2000; Winstead, 1986; Wright, 1991). Men's friendships can be described as instrumental; they tend to be organized around shared interests and activities

and the exchange of tangible rewards and favors and to be action-oriented rather than person-oriented (Markiewicz et al., 2000; Messner, 1992; Winstead, 1986; Wright, 1988, 1991).

Moreover, research indicates that while men achieve and define closeness through the sharing of activities, such as being on a committee or playing a sport together, women tend to define and achieve closeness through the sharing of feelings and emotions (Odden & Sias, 1997; Wood & Inman, 1993). Indeed, the provision of social and emotional support is significantly more likely to be a function of women's relationships at work, with women both receiving and providing more emotional social support than men in times of unhappiness or distress (Flaherty & Richman, 1989; Morrison, 2009a).

Moreover, when stressed or anxious, men are generally less likely than women to seek emotional support (Ashton & Fuerhrer, 1993). Hence there are gender differences in what motivates men and women to seek out friends in the workplace.

As in other contexts, women in organizations have been found to place more importance on their friendships than do men. Further, it is possible that the organizational commitment of women may be more affected by affiliation opportunities than that of men. Evidence that friendships have more salience for women can be seen in a study examining work attitudes of dentists, which found that friendship opportunities, such as a highly cohesive work environment, was related positively to commitment among female (but not male) dentists (Kaldenberg, Becker, & Zvonkovic, 1995). The authors state, "affective commitment was related to proportion of friends in the workplace for female dentists" (p. 1371). This may point to a gender difference in the commitment process,

which relates to generalizations that males seek independence while women seek intimacy (Kaldenberg et al., 1995).

Looking specifically at work friendships, Sapadin (1988) investigated same-sex and cross-sex friendships of 156 professional men and women using a self-report questionnaire consisting of a rating scale and open-ended questions. Sapadin's results were largely consistent with research from nonwork contexts, finding for example that women's same-sex friendships were rated higher for overall quality, intimacy, enjoyment, and nurturance. Men, on the other hand, rated their cross-sex friendships higher in these areas. This research can be interpreted as suggesting that women's participation in professional roles has not resulted in noticeable changes to friendship patterns. Gender differences in friendship remain evident despite ever-changing career roles for women. As in the nonwork context, findings regarding friendships in the workplace generally indicate that both men and women report friendships with women as more enjoyable, nurturing, and of an overall higher quality (Morrison, 2009a; Sapadin, 1988).

In contrast to Sapadin's (1988) findings, Markiewicz et al. (2000) found that some gender differences in friendships are *not* consistently carried over into a workplace context. While research has shown that friendships outside the workplace involving women are generally evaluated as more satisfying than those involving men, Markiewicz et al. found this not to be the case in all organizational settings. Instead they found that friendships involving women provided fewer rewards and were less satisfying. Factors that might account for this finding include women's relatively lower status in many professions (Winstead & Streets, 2013), making them less desirable as friends for



instrumental rewards, and sex-role stereotypes leading to unfavorable attributions about work-related competencies. In addition, the relative proportion of women in a given occupation may mean that their token status might make them less able to provide salient rewards, as they tend to have less power (Ibarra, 1993). While more research is needed, it is clear that the work context influences the nature of friendships between coworkers.

Another explanation for these conflicting findings is the notion that gender is socially constructed. Organizations may differ in the meanings ascribed to being “male” or “female” such that being female is linked to different expectations and behaviors in one organization versus another, or in a workplace versus other facets of society. A woman and man engaging in the same behavior are not necessarily perceived or evaluated similarly by others (Winstead & Streets, 2013). As an example of this, women are generally expected to display more nurturing, prosocial behaviors. Hence, if a woman is in a demanding senior management role and behaves in a stereotypically masculine way, for example acting assertively, she may be judged more harshly than a man in the same context. If assertive behavior is the most effective option in that instance, the female manager is in an unfortunate double bind: Should she be a “good manager” or a “good woman”?

## Benefits and Challenges of Coworker Friendship

### Individual-Level Benefits, Challenges, and Recommendations

Relationships with colleagues are critical to understanding how to do work in acceptable ways in any given organizational context (Korte & Lin, 2012). However, beyond this, each individual can decide the extent to which they wish to go beyond mere acquaintanceships and engage in friendships at work. Generally the evidence shows that

if you develop one or more friendships with colleagues at work, you are more likely to be satisfied in your work, perform well, and wish to stay in your organization (Berman et al., 2002; Nielsen et al., 2000; Rath & Harter, 2010; Riordan & Griffeth, 1995; Winstead, 1986). However, it may be stressful to manage the dual relationships implied by being both a friend and a work colleague to another person (Bridge & Baxter, 1992). Issues such as favoritism and openness can come to the fore when deciding where your allegiances lie.

There may also be interesting demographic and structural nuances in these decisions. For example, with regard to gender, because men tend to view friendships in more instrumental ways, decisions about whether or not to develop and maintain coworker friendships can have significant career consequences. Men who avoid workplace friendships may miss out on critical information that enhances their own performance, such as not being informed by work friends about upcoming changes or opportunities. In contrast, women tend to use coworker friendships for support and affiliation; women who eschew coworker friendships miss out on positive emotions, assistance, and encouragement, and will tend to feel less loyal to the organization. Demographic factors may support or hinder coworker friendships. For example, because surface-level similarities have been found to promote relationships among colleagues (Kammeyer-Mueller, Livingston, & Liao, 2011), coworkers who differ from the predominant demography of the organization, such as being the only older person among mostly younger employees, may find it harder to identify coworkers who are sufficiently similar to them to consider developing friendships.

Structural factors may also facilitate or hinder coworker friendships. At more senior levels, there are fewer same-level peers to choose from, and peers may be competing more fiercely for resources or promotion. Moreover, senior workers may be privy to more sensitive information that can affect the careers of others. This may exacerbate dual tensions if one opts for the role of friend alongside that of colleague. Related to proximity—a key factor in friendship formation—those who are out of the office for long periods (e.g., salespeople) or who work remotely (e.g., teleworkers) may find it harder to develop friendships at work. This may be especially the case because, at a distance, there are fewer opportunities to identify the similarities that provide an initial basis for friendship formation.

While structural- and personal-level factors may help or hinder the development of workplace friendships, these factors can be facilitated to promote friendships. For example, one study found that age dissimilarity relative to coworkers stimulated more proactive behavior from new employees (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2011), with proactive behavior associated with better adjustment into a new organization (Cooper-Thomas & Burke, 2012). Therefore, friendships may be developed even when individual factors do not appear favorable.

## Organization-Level Benefits, Challenges and Recommendations

In spite of the inherent tensions of workplace friendships, the benefits seem to more than offset these challenges. It is unsurprising then that the majority of senior managers approve of coworker friendships and view them as improving communication and performance (Berman et al., 2002; see also chapter 9, this volume). What then can organizations do to facilitate friendships?

First, given the importance of proximity to friendship formation, it is useful to consider the physical layout of work. Research shows that increasing chance encounters allows social interaction, which fosters friendship formation (Easterbrook & Vignoles, 2014). Shared facilities can promote this, whether these are task-focused, for example a printing and photocopying area where staff can bump into each other, or instead social or needs-focused, such as social hubs for informal meetings, lunch rooms, or on-site cafés and recreational areas.

Second, work tasks themselves may be tailored to encourage friendships. Where tasks are more interdependent, requiring colleagues to coordinate their efforts to complete a task, this is associated with greater levels of job satisfaction and lower intentions of leaving (Regts & Molleman, 2013). Perceptions of interdependence between colleagues can be fostered from the outset. Research shows the importance of the early period of organizational entry for new employees (Cooper-Thomas & Anderson, 2006), with the organizations' initial treatment of newcomers having lasting effects (van der Werff & Buckley, 2014). New employees will perceive tasks as more interdependent when they are given social support and appropriate role models (Lu & Tjosvold, 2012), especially if role models display cooperative behaviors. By providing appropriate norms from the start for cooperation on tasks, and structuring tasks to require interaction, organizations can facilitate friendship formation.

In line with the importance of role models, leaders set the tone for friendship formation. In instances where leaders have more positive relationships with their direct subordinates and display mutual respect and trust, both reciprocity and the formation of friendships is encouraged (Tse et al., 2008). Similarly, the positive mood of leaders

results in more positive affect among subordinates, as well as greater work coordination (Sy, Côté, & Saavedra, 2005). This matches with results showing contagion effects of positive, motivated states between colleagues, in turn, influencing performance (Bakker & Xanthopoulou, 2009), and also the positive, facilitating effects of positive group affective tone (Tse et al., 2008). Overall, positive emotions at work—from leaders and colleagues—may facilitate friendship formation. In turn, friendships may complete a virtuous circle and, by leading to more frequently daily interactions, facilitate the development and cross-over of positive mood states (McGrath, Cooper-Thomas, & Garrosa-Hernández, 2015).

Finally, friendships are closely linked with positive emotion, proximity, and opportunity for social interaction. Organizations can purposefully create opportunities for staff to establish or strengthen coworker relationships and to transform relationships into friendships. Organizations can provide team-building days, work picnics, lunch-time or after-work sports activities, or drinks and food. It is also important to set norms for social interactions—if those higher up in the organization are seen going for coffee or lunch with colleagues, or stopping by people's desks to have conversations, this shows it is acceptable and sets an appropriate norm that others are likely to mimic. In contrast, where senior people do not participate in informal social interactions and eat lunch at their desk, this may set an implicit behavioral norm that social behaviors are frivolous, hence discouraging such behaviors at work and limiting workplace friendships.

## Conclusion

Coworker friendships are voluntary relationships between colleagues, where each values the other for who they are as a person. Among other benefits, having coworkers as

friends is associated with positive attitudes and better performance. There are some risks to coworker friends, in particular managing the tensions inherent in having dual and possibly multiple roles, when coworkers are both colleagues and friends. However, for most workers and most organizations, these tensions are worth the trade-off: Working life is richer and more stimulating with coworker friends.

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