

# Friend or Foe – Who are you in the office?

Most of us would agree that throughout our careers, we've met people we bond with instantly. We've also worked with people who seem much more difficult. And yet, our business success relies heavily on our ability to get along with everyone, regardless of whether we "click" or not. There is an art to building positive and mutually beneficial relationships at work. And it has nothing to do with drinks after work or parties on the weekend. In fact, it's a skill that anyone can learn, with benefits greater than you can imagine.

Take Kelly, for instance. Kelly is new to her business development role. Her manager told her that her new team will be very supportive and a great resource as she comes up to speed. However, Kelly hasn't found this to be the case. Information sharing from her team is sparse at best, completely withheld at worst. The worst offender is Ramona, who seems to have no interest whatsoever in helping Kelly. Kelly feels frustrated, isolated and threatened by the lack of support.

Ramona, on the other hand, doesn't believe she should be giving Kelly special treatment. If her manager insists on hiring people without "appropriate experience", it isn't Ramona's job to spend her time training them. Additionally, Ramona is unwilling to share pivotal information she has uncovered through years of hard work. Ramona feels drained and fed up.

There may be times when we were Kelly, and others when we were Ramona. This is a classic case of opposing agendas, a common problem in the office environment. Very quickly, this type of situation escalates into long term trust and communication issues, leading to a working nightmare for all parties, including management.

What can we learn from Kelly and Ramona? First of all, we witnessed some primitive instincts influencing the interactions between Kelly and Ramona. As David Rock explains in

his book, *Your Brain at Work*, when we first meet someone, we categorise them as either a 'friend' or a 'foe'. This dates back to our primitive ancestry, when survival depended on this simple classification. What's interesting to know about these primitive classifications is that we store this information about people in two entirely different parts of our brain. The 'friends' go to a place in our brain where we store our memories of ourselves. We are open to input, ideas, interactions and helping our 'friends'. Our 'foes' are in a more remote part of our brain which signals danger and distance. Therefore, we are quick to shut down or deny the ideas and interactions of foes in order to promote our safety. We have no desire to help our foes in any way. A mere case of opposing agendas in today's world is enough to classify someone as a foe. You can see how this becomes a problem in our complex work environments, where opposing agendas are often the case.

So how do we ensure that we are categorised as a 'friend' rather than a 'foe'? In the initial stages of meeting someone, you need to establish some form of relatedness. Recognise any commonalities between you and others. Seek information about the other person. The key is sincerity, and sincerity builds trust. Commonalities, when you first meet, can be previous organisations or colleagues in common, similar qualifications or

experience, cities/countries in which you have both worked or visited, the lists goes on. You're searching for things which subconsciously say 'we are a bit the same'. In the work environment, it is best to look for common ground that isn't too personal. To be classified as a 'friend' in a work context, you don't have to know lots of personal details.

Another way to establish relatedness is by sharing your 'why'. Whether it is with a new client, or colleague, or in a job interview, sharing why you have chosen this job goes a long way to bringing down walls. For example, if Kelly had shared with Ramona her passion about her new role and why she wanted to be a valuable resource to the company, Ramona may have been more likely to help her. Great leaders are exceptional at sharing their 'why'. If they didn't, we wouldn't follow.

If your situation is of long term 'foe' in the office, whether the foe is you or someone else, the strategy is less straight forward. It's important to remember that, generally speaking, people don't exist just to make other people in the office miserable. Deep down, somewhere, is a positive reason behind most behaviour. Although we may believe we know the motivation behind other people's behaviour, we can never be sure. Remember, sincerity builds trust. In a long term foe situation, rebuilding trust is the key. Seek to understand both the

spoken and unspoken word. Search for the positive intent in the actions. Look for commonality and mutual goals as a way of demonstrating empathy. Demonstrating empathy nurtures a feeling of 'us' or 'friend' and moves away from 'us and them', them being the 'foes'. Be prepared for the long haul when trying to transform foe relationships. Trust takes time.

The success factor that most workplaces have in common is the human factor – we need each other to be successful. Learning to get along with everyone in the workplace is one of the most important professional skills. By being sincere,

establishing relatedness, looking for commonality and demonstrating empathy, you know you're giving it your best shot. 💡

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