



FRIENDSHIPS CAN COMPLICATE THE WORKPLACE

BY ELEANOR BLOXHAM



“Even before COVID-19 struck, 40 percent of office workers globally felt lonely. In the U.S., almost one in five adults said they didn’t have a single friend at work,” Noreena Hertz, author of *The Lonely Century: Coming Together in a World That’s Pulling Apart*, told the BBC last November.

It’s a sad commentary on work relationships that have become increasingly transient since the 1980s, exacerbated by layoffs and the instability of many jobs.

Work friendship has become unreliable.

A little over a year after Beth Comstock, the former top female executive at GE, lost her job in 2017, she told *Marie Claire* magazine: “People who were your friends, certainly your work friends, they vanish. That’s sad, right? ...They only liked me because they thought I was going to get them business or that I could get them here or there.” Comstock said it had surprised her because she hadn’t viewed some of the relationships the same way.

Of course, there are close connections at work that can be downright disruptive to an organization’s functioning.

I recall sisters working together in a business unit where I was employed, having the ability to influence each other’s pay and promotions. It created a sense of unfairness among the staff.

Dating others at work is another example, one that can be corrosive and have harassment implications, even if the liaison did not begin that way.

At the board of directors level, friendships can have consequences and call board actions into question. A board can have what appears to be the right processes, such as independent committees, and no tangible preferential treatment to a member or a member’s friends. But courts may find those board-level friendships have impeded independent judgment and produced biased decision-making, and may hold the directors accountable.

Organizations need healthy interactions balanced by conflict-of-interest policies and employment practices that bar nepotism and ensure fairness.

More broadly, it’s important to raise awareness about cognitive biases that could interfere with optimal organizational functioning.

Today, U.S. workplaces face political polarization akin to the Hatfields and

McCoys. It turns out, driving this polarization could be a single core belief.

Based on research involving over 2,000 people published in the January *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, professors from The Pennsylvania State University found that more than any other trait or circumstance, the belief in hegemonic masculinity, patriarchy, and “culturally idealized” male dominance explained the 2016 and 2020 U.S. electoral decisions of Black, Brown, White, female, and male voters.

Boards and managers need to understand how evident and hidden credence in male supremacy and related authoritarian leadership preferences can drive subtle and overt board and employee behaviors, then work to proactively hone and communicate the values they wish their boards and organizations to emulate — that is, if employers want collegial collaborations, if not outright friendships.



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