Just Got Promoted? Your Team Has Changed — You Should Too

Career Development

I have watched many lawyers and professional colleagues get promoted to team leader or leave to lead another organization. And I have promoted individuals into leadership roles many times. As compared to joining from outside the organization, this internal transition can be particularly challenging because peers become subordinates overnight. Unfortunately, the day the promotion takes effect is the day you need to move from *being a friend to being friendly with your now-subordinate colleagues.*

This relates to equality. Your team wants equal treatment based on their potential, ability, and performance. Having “friends” or “old friends” creates the perception you are not, or cannot, be fair. I have gone through this transition several times, and have some tips to share. Your team members watch you very carefully. They notice with whom you have coffee, lunch, dinner, and drinks, and who has a chance to interact with you. You need to act differently, and allocate your time fairly.

When I first arrived at MassMutual as general counsel, several of my new direct reports participated in a men’s basketball league — a great way to interact and get to know each other (after the game the participants would get drinks). I told them they could no longer participate. It was not fair to the women whom they supervised, who did not have this opportunity. I have also seen certain leaders interact with specific team members in their “off-hours,” or drive subordinates to work or carpool, which sounds like a good way to share expenses. But it creates a different perception for the other team members — and one’s perception is his or her reality.

When I was at US WEST, one of my peers and a true friend was someone who always had the latest joke. And yes, I laughed at them at times, even when they might not have been appropriate. After I got promoted and he reported to me, he told a joke in a group setting that was over the edge. I remember telling him, “Pete, never do that to me again.” I was once at a level where I could ignore this, but now I could never be seen as accepting or condoning such behavior.

You need to take time to understand what motivates your team members. This sounds formulaic, but it works. First, create a spreadsheet with the names of your direct reports on it. For each, outline four factors: their current business objectives, their long-term personal objectives, their interests, and what they value. I have done this many times, yet I am often surprised how often I did not know basic information. To the extent you do not know your direct report’s interests or values, simply ask him or her at your next one-on-one. Having this knowledge, you can and should interact with your various team members based on their motivating factors. In addition, how you assign work, recognize, reward, and motivate them should vary significantly for each team member.

Make sure you get out and visibly interact with your team. Have meetings, coffee, and lunches in open spaces. I am an introvert, so I have to force myself to do this. One method I employ is buying a large coffee and not returning to my office until it is empty. It provides two options: walk around interacting with my team, or stand in the hall drinking it alone. And there are times when it’s mandatory to be present, like when a team member gets an award or is recognized in some way. Don’t underestimate the adage, “80 percent of success is just showing up.” I am often shocked when leaders fail to attend diversity events, or even our beer and wine socials. They may feel they are “too busy,” but it indicates they are “busy” doing the wrong things. The same is true in the community. Attend events, be on panels, write articles, and engage. It raises the stature of your team and the company. Don’t exit to take calls or send emails during these events. Think about the message it conveys. If you do not respect everyone else’s time, you kill the value of getting the group together.

The leader is no longer a peer. When you go to that offsite meeting, do not stay with the team until the end of the evening. Head to bed and let them all hang out together. It gives them an opportunity to discuss you in your absence, which is a good thing. They can share how to best interact with you and how to be successful as a part of your team. And remember that gifts in corporate America go one way: down. A year-end gift from you bought with personal funds is just fine, but if you accept any birthday or holiday gifts from any of your team members, you simply create a mess: What do the other members give? What if they give nothing? What if they don’t celebrate the same holidays you do?

When you are promoted, not only do peer relationships change, but so do your relationships with other leaders. For example, when I recently promoted someone, she became a peer to her former boss and her boss’ boss. She didn’t feel unwelcome, but she did have trouble contributing initially. The new dynamic required her to speak up more because her “vote” was equal to the other leaders. She had to realize she was at the table for a reason and she was not doing our team a favor by being a quiet participant. In fact, one of the reasons she was promoted was for her perspective, which was different from others and provided more options to the team.

Keep in mind that as a leader *all the successes belong to your team.* When interviewed for a new opportunity, I make it clear that my resume reflects the results of the teams I’ve led. On the other hand, keep in mind that *all failures and mistakes belong to you.* Stand tall and assume the responsibility, regardless of the reason. Unless your boss has no clue, they will realize both successes and failures are really owned by you. I think US President Harry Truman said it well (often

attributed to US President Ronald Reagan, since he had the words on a small plaque on his desk): “It is amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who takes the credit.”

Being a leader of a team is definitely a different role than being one of the team members. It will be very lonely at times. And you may not have as many “friends.” But as you watch your team members grow and advance their careers and obtain significant positive results, it will make it all worthwhile. It’s very different, but it’s also very rewarding.

Mark Roellig

Owner

mroellig PLLC

Mark Roellig was previously general counsel of four Fortune 500 companies and now advises in-house counsel as a mentor and career coach.