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J.MICHAEL.MOORE@EMORY.EDU

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Dealing with frenemies

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Most people go into business with the idea of being friends, but if strains occur that test their relationship, it's not hard for those one-time "friends" in business to become "frenemies."

When **Linda Boatright**, director of employee and labor relations at **Kaiser Permanente of Georgia**, first started in the workforce nearly 40 years ago, that term didn't exist, but behavior like that was called "disingenuous" or "backstabbing."

"Whatever definitions we assign, it is someone who pretends to be our friend, but undermines us," said Boatright, who is also a board member of the Atlanta chapter of **Society for Human Resources Management**. "They clearly represent a risk to business and workforce angst."

Boatright attributes this to co-workers spending more time together today compared with 30 years ago. Even managers blur the lines — going

out for drinks, buying gifts or hanging out with subordinates outside of work. And, the business environment is more informal: Co-workers meet in the boardroom, and then take the conversation over to the coffee shop or to lunch.

What that introduces, she said, is conversations that get too realistic. In addition, what was a private conversation about a manager eventually gets back to that person, conveniently at promotion time or when someone is up to lead a project.

“Relationships and conversations that are not guarded can lead to this whole dynamic of frenemy,” Boatright added. “If you don’t know they have your best interests at heart, things could come back to haunt you.”

Not helping the situation is that most relationships or partnerships fail rather than succeed, said **Sandy Jap**, professor of marketing at **Emory University’s Goizueta Business School**.

“The failure rate is 60 percent, and it has been that way for two decades,” she said.

And, with divorce rates for second and third marriages both being around 70 percent of failure, it also suggests that having experience in relationships doesn’t necessarily make someone better at them, she



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Two faced co-workers, act like a friend but are really undermining your career and in some cases cost you a job.

added.

The issue of how to make partnerships work has been ongoing. In 2014, a **Chief Marketing Officer Council** survey found nearly half of the respondents said they had trouble maintaining and creating successful relationships with other organizations, Jap said.

To overcome a frenemy at work or in a business relationship, Jap recommends not making assumptions. For one, don't assume that a partnership is for a lifetime or that longevity is an indicator of success.

Treating a business like a marriage can make a partnership or relationship go stale: there is less innovation and parties are less motivated to do what is best for them, Jap said.

"We encourage firms to switch partners and not to try to be monogamous," she added. "Monogamy is great for marriage, but in business, you need to keep your options open and actively be considering alternatives."

Overcoming frenemies is also about taking the emotion out of the relationship. Boatright recommends getting human resources involved, but also being a better self-manager: Be self-aware of what is said and how it could impact others and your career.

There is not a lot to be gained in some instances when partners or co-workers are upset with each other, said **Brennan Bolt**, a labor and employment partner at **McGuireWoods LLP**.

Bolt's expertise is in non-compete agreements. He said when that is in play, along with the possibility of losing intellectual property, frenemies can arise.

As an example, he cites a situation in which one person who left prevents

his former company from winning business by bad-mouthing it to a potential client.

“You have to take the emotion out of it, and treat it like a business decision,” he said.

It is also possible for partners to have too much trust. Instead, it is better to trust and verify, Jap said.

In addition, managers get used to saying goodbye and not thinking it is a bad thing, she added. With the business’s interests in mind, partners or managers should be able to say that a relationship or partnership isn’t meeting goals, or isn’t going the way the strategy is shifting.

“Don’t allow partnerships to marinate beyond what the value is,” Jap said.

When relationships are strained, a frenemy could turn into a bully. Frenemies are more covert in what they do, but bullying is a form of aggression, and many times, people witness it, Boatright said.

There are pressures today that didn’t exist decades ago, and the desire to have the best jobs or opportunities gets in the way of how people treat each other, she said. Companies need to focus on creating a workplace where employees can have fun, as long as the lines aren’t blurred to do that, she added.

There have been many instances of frenemies in the marketplace. Jap cites the partnership between Google and Samsung. What started out as “an amazing partnership” of operating system and manufacturing and distribution, became frenemies when Google bought out Motorola and Samsung countered by developing a relationship with Microsoft.

Her take? As priorities change, the power changes within partnerships and relationships.

“You have to keep relations up with communication, making sure everyone is getting a fair payoff and expectations about the future are clear,” Jap said. “If you don’t do that, suspicions come in, and it becomes hard to keep trying to make the relationship work.”

Once a “frenemy” is acknowledged in the workplace:

- 1.** Make sure it is real and address it.
- 2.** Have a crucial conversation that is fact-based.
- 3.** Step back and listen to the other person.
- 4.** Make changes: Limit interaction with the person and recognize that work is work and social is social.

Source: Linda Boatright, director of employee and labor relations at Kaiser Permanente of Georgia