

Being friends with your boss has a downside

December 28, 2018

Given the hours invested, the intensity required, and the physical proximity forced upon us in this age of the open-floor-plan office, having friends at work may feel essential to one's survival.

Yet research published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* suggests there's one office friendship that can have a costly unintended consequence. University of Chicago's Alex Shaw, Hebrew University's Shoham Choshen-Hillel and UCLA Anderson's Eugene M. Caruso (who conducted this research while affiliated with University of Chicago) find that in certain office situations, managers feel compelled to be extra hard on a colleague who is also a friend.

In [a series of lab experiments](#), the researchers found that when a manager faces a decision that will get a public airing throughout the office—such as deciding which colleague deserves a bonus—he is less likely to give it to a deserving friend, preferring to give it to a non-friend to signal to the entire staff what an impartial boss he is.

Anticipating the optics of appearing to favor a friend (even when said friend rocked the project and deserves the bonus on merit) causes bosses to develop a bias against their friend. “They will systematically treat their friends in a worse manner than they treat their non-friends,” write Shaw, Choshen-Hillel and Caruso. “The concern with being condemned for partiality...even when there is a merit-based justification for doing so,” can cause bosses to throw high-performing friends under the bus in an effort to avoid potentially taking some air out of office morale.

Notably, the researchers find that when bosses have the cover of knowing the bonus will remain private, they have no problem giving their deserving friend the reward.