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Michael W. Firmin

*Cedarville University*, [firmin@cedarville.edu](mailto:firmin@cedarville.edu)

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# Perils of Being Friends With College Administrators

**Michael W. Firmin, Ph.D.**

Professor of Psychology

*Cedarville University*

*Cedarville, OH*

## ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper addresses an issue that may never be a problem for some in higher education, and yet may be the Achilles' heel for others. No absolute answers exist regarding befriending administrators, but I will address some of the dynamics that inherently are involved with the phenomenon and also various potential perils. To be clear, I am addressing situations where a faculty member is a friend with a Dean or Academic Vice President. In some contexts, the principles also may apply to friends in a position lower, such as Department Chair, or higher, such as Provost or institutional President. The friendships may be pre-existent to an administrator's appointment—or friendships that budded after the administrator's installation.

### **Dynamic Realities**

#### ***1. Administrators need social connection.***

No person is an island. This is more than a cliché; it is reality. We all possess cogent needs to be liked and to like others. People desire to invest themselves in the needs of others and receive succorance from friends and others who care genuinely about them. In other words, when a faculty member accepts an appointment to administration, a switch does not turn from on to off relative to needs for social connection.

This point is made first, since some administrators may find themselves in denial regarding the matter. That is, they may be intuitively aware of the perils discussed in this article—and consequently attempt to push aside their needs for friendships and other close relationships with others. I posit that such psychological denial is unhealthy. As humans, we vary individually in the amount of connection we need with others. But admitting the reality exists is the first step in assuring the need does not become a professional detriment.

#### ***2. Administration can be a lonely role.***

Obviously, when making a personal appraisal regarding the acceptance of an

administrative position, there are multiple factors to consider. Among other dynamics, do not overlook social needs. We are hard wired genetically with varying levels of needs in this regard. But the nature and demands of an administrator's role results in some degree of social isolation that, all other factors being equal, likely the administrator would not face in a professional position.

First, the nature of an administrator's position may result in a more lonely life than might likely be the case if he/she remained a professor. Firing people, which sometimes needs to occur, does not typically increase one's popularity. The same is true for other difficult decisions that need to be made, such as denying tenure, rejecting requests for pay increases, refusing budget requests, and the like. It can be lonely at the top since administrators cannot realistically please everyone. And in pleasing some, by defacto they sometimes will be displeasing others.

Second, the demands of an administrator's role may result in a more lonely life than what typical professors may face. I have never known any good administrators who have worked bankers' hours. The day's meetings may end at 5 p.m., but correspondence, e-mails, reading, report writing, phone calls, and a myriad of similar responsibilities often require after-business-hours clock time. The professional life, while busy in its own right, can lend itself better to engaging in socialization than a demanding administrator's life.

Some socialization is built into many administrators' job descriptions. That is, they are expected to attend retirement parties, interview at meals, host visiting accreditation teams, socialize with potential donors, and the like. However, the social release afforded by these types of functions, I would argue, does not fill the social needs cup of most administrators. They are on duty during these functions, both figuratively and literally. That is, during such functions, administrators must be utilizing their mental faculties in ways that achieve their academic objectives. They do not speak or react

as individuals. Rather, interactions are guarded as they represent their official positions. Required social functions simply do not allow for the stress release that comes as part of true socialization—where all are on level playing fields—and an administrator can express his/her own individuality.

### ***3. Pre-existing social networks are difficult to disassemble.***

This point is made particularly with the administrator in mind who has been hired from within the organization. It also assumes that prior to the promotion, the administrator possessed a social network of friends over whom he/she now has a supervisory relationship. Given these dynamics, it can be difficult to address the post-relationship dynamics that inevitably will occur.

How probable is it that a newly-appointed administrator will sit down with each friend and systematically explore how his/her new position will likely affect their future friendship? Further, what are the chances that newly-appointed administrators will ask their friends for periodic “checks” to assess how their continued friendships are working, straining, or not working? I pose that such steps are unlikely for most administrators, and they would be quite awkward if they did occur.

So with what situation is the administrator left? The dynamics of the previous relationship change and communication about it is left to nuances, innuendos, inferences, and other non-verbal interpretations. Intelligent and mature people certainly can maneuver through such social milieu successfully. However, it is challenging to say the least—and fraught with a host of potential problems as the dynamics unfold over time.

In some situations where internal promotions occur, pre-existing friendships can not, should not, or simply will not continue. Obviously this holds its own awkwardness. Does a newly-appointed administrator sit down with a friend and say something like, “Now that I’m your boss, it just isn’t going to work out for us to be friends like we were only weeks ago”? The dynamic can be intensified when spouses are involved. That is, sometimes spouses may wish for particular friendships to continue unchanged, but the administrator understands this may not be possible due to issues in the office. This dynamic will be more fully addressed at the article’s end.

### ***4. Some situations or people-diads may work better than others.***

Each institution of higher education possesses its own culture. Consequently, friendships with subordinates in one particular college may work without a hitch—and yet in other milieu, it could be a recipe for professional or personal disaster.

Likewise, people obviously are all created differently. Therefore, friendship between an administrator and a particular subordinate friend likely will be very different than a friendship with a different friend. Consequently, I am avoiding axioms in this article intended to direct the decisions of all administrators relative to friendships. Rather, a combination of the people involved with the situation, mixed with the institutional milieu (including particular administrative responsibilities), will result in situational ethics, rather than universal, governing the prudence of steps to follow for administrators in these matters. In short, simplistic principles such as “never be friends with a subordinate” certainly are convenient, but they may not be right in all situations—or practical in others.

### ***5. Administrators need to make some friends outside their authority-lines.***

Psychologically, everyone needs periodic escapes from the stressors and pressures of demanding jobs. Friendships provide one of a number of such functions. Having people who are trusted, personally invested, and with whom a person can engage in soul-bearing is an important component for handling life’s squeezes in healthy ways. I propose that administrators do well to ensure that they possess a repertoire of people who fit these measures—and who are outside their lives of administrative authority.

In addition to stress-release, such persons also help provide wise counsel, make good sounding boards, and provide ethical checks to an administrator’s moral compass. Being outside the circle of the administrator’s authority, these people are more free to be objective in their perspectives. Their personal and professional lives are unaffected by whatever decisions the administrator makes. This does not guarantee prudent advice, of course, but at least the diminished complication of the dynamics involved increases the likelihood, everything else in the situation being equal.

### ***6. Manipulative relationships are dangerous.***

Manipulation is a strong term, and to some degree it connotes deliberate maleficence. However, in the context of the present discussion, I believe that there are times when friendships between administrators and subordinates may involve manipulation, even subconsciously. For example, faculty or staff may let the significance of accomplishing their academic objectives strengthen to the point where they strike up unhealthy friendships with administrators in order to get what they want. I am not suggesting that they always think conscious thoughts such as, “Gee, if I become good friends with Administrator Jones right now, then he/she will give me what I want.”

The human psyche is complex, to say the least, and we are not always consciously aware of our true motivations. One does not need to be a Freudian in order to understand that manipulation can be subtle at times. Moreover, this dynamic is a two-way street. That is, administrators may sometimes be tempted to engender social friendships with various faculty or staff manipulatively—with hidden agendas or intents other than true social connection.

#### **Perils to Avoid**

The aforementioned points were intended as observational truisms. That is, I stated them as simply facts about which administrators should be aware. To be forewarned is to be forearmed, so the adage states. Sometimes being alert to dynamics inherently involved in situations provides self-insight that is useful for application to particular situations. The following points build from these observations and take them further. That is, based on the previously stated dynamics, I flag six perils that administrators should avoid relative to friendships with subordinates.

##### **1. *Letting friendships cloud optimal judgment***

Administrators are called on to make good decisions. While this construct is vague, unmeasurable, and ambiguous, the fact remains nonetheless. Consistently making good decisions may be one of the most powerful factors in earning faculty confidence and trust. Without good decision-making, an administrator's tenure likely will be short.

Friendship with subordinates is fraught with the potential danger of letting one's relationship negatively interfere with making good decisions in some situations. Objectivity is not a hallmark of all apt decisions, but it is of most of them. Administrators must be able to pull their own affect or agendas from situations at hand—making calls that will be beneficial for the greater good. In short, ordinarily, friendships must remain secondary to the high road of objectivity, logic, and the facts at hand.

##### **2. *Administrators' friends being viewed by others as brown-nosers***

Our reputations are very dear and largely define who we are to others. Sometimes how we perceive situations internally and how others interpret what they observe—although viewing the same data—can be quite different. In the present context, an administrator and his/her subordinate friend may have a healthy relationship on all levels. The relationship may be cognizant of all the dynamics discussed in this article and take deliberate steps to ensure its wholesomeness.

Despite this, sometimes situations arise where others do not come to view matters in this same light. From their reference points, administrators' friends who happen to be

subordinates may be judged to be conniving or self-serving. Perceptions and reality do not always equate. The point here is that administrators must be extra vigilant in how they communicate to and with their friend/subordinate, what they receive in relation to what others receive, how they are treated around others, and what scuttle-butt is allowed to be passed around unchecked. The good reputations of subordinate/friends should not be sacrificed at the expense of the administrator's emotional or psychological needs for connectedness.

##### **3. *Administrators' friends who are subordinate becoming regular confidants***

We all find ourselves in places at times where we overhear information to which we ought not otherwise be privy. While such occurrences are the inevitable result of human interaction, keeping such occasions to a minimal is part of administrative responsibility. When a subordinate/friend is in the office as a sensitive phone call is taken, for example, then the friend should be asked to leave the room. When a subordinate/friend asks an administrator how his/her day is going, unloading confidential or impertinent information should not be part of the reply.

From social psychology we know there are multiple types of power. One type is information power. We feel powerful when knowing things that others do not know, or knowing it before it is revealed to others. The problem is that this power is only fully experienced when the knowledge is shared with others. Consequently, when subordinate/friends become privy to inside information, it creates a very cogent temptation to slip or leak at least part of what they know to others. The power they achieve in so doing, of course, is to the detriment of the administrator who shared the information with the subordinate/friend. That is, the power comes at the expense of his/her reputation and perceived trust.

##### **4. *Taking refusal personally or as rejection.***

I believe most administrators want to be nice guys. There surely are some sadists who enjoy saying no to people or declining legitimate requests. Those people are the minority, however. Most administrators I have known like to grant requests and enjoy the happiness others receive when the administrator can help them achieve their goals.

When a personal friend, who is a subordinate, makes a request of his/her administrator, a dynamic occurs which has the potential for unhealthy results. The administrator may say yes, when he/she should say no—due to letting personal feelings affect good judgment. On the other hand, if he/she rejects the request, then the friend/subordinate may feel hurt or emotionally wounded. There may

be a sense: “How could you deny this, after all we’ve been through?”

It likely is rare for such dynamics to be overt. That makes them more potentially dangerous. Consider how often a friend/subordinate would explicitly state: “I’m deeply offended that you turned down my request. My personal friendship or loyalty to you should have carried more weight on this matter than what obviously it did.” Though infrequently said, these are thoughts and emotions experienced sometimes by friend/subordinates. The real potential for bitterness, resentment, and broken relationships exists, especially when the request is of utmost importance to the friend/subordinate and also the manner in which the request was denied.

#### **5. *Confusing or blurring of roles at times***

Compartmentalization that involves processing life’s events in separate segments, without integrating them holistically or allowing the components to mentally or emotionally interact, is not necessarily a bad quality. Rather it is a needed characteristic for some professionals to do their jobs adequately. For example, a surgeon whose patient dies on the operating table still must attend her son’s soccer game in the afternoon, and a lawyer whose lost case results in his client’s long-term prison sentence still needs to show romance to his wife on a planned date that evening. Compartmentalization allows professions to multi-task the various aspects of their lives, without failures in some areas overly affecting others in negative ways.

To at least some degree, effective administration requires compartmentalization. An administrator cannot let the stress or pressure of the job negatively affect all other aspects of his/her life. However, this may not always occur as it should, and administrators may at times ineffectively compartmentalize their relationships with friends/subordinates.

Ideally, when an administrator interacts with a friend/subordinate regarding friendship issues—it should remain in that compartment. If this occurs, then the plane is level with two equals engaging in social connection. But sometimes things may inadvertently slip from one compartment to the next—or be mistakenly placed in the wrong compartment by the other person. Although compartmentalization is a word picture and construct, it is a real dynamic and quite powerful. Clear lines between personal friendship and professional relationship may blur at times, and the results can be hurtful to one or both parties.

Most successful administrators compartmentalize, either because it is innate, or they learn to do so due to successfully doing their jobs. However, this may not be a natural skill for their

friend/subordinate. He/she may live a lifestyle, for example, such that compartmentalization seldom occurs, and when it needs to happen, they do not like it and/or are not good at making it happen. As an overgeneralization, for example, many of the artists that I personally know find compartmentalization quite difficult. In fact, spilling their personal lives over into their professional lives as painters or sculptors is part of the secret to their success. Compartmentalization for these individuals might be professionally detrimental.

The point here is that administrators need to exercise particular vigilance in this area so that thinking and understanding on various issues is the same relative to life-compartments shared with friends/subordinates.

#### **6. *Spousal dynamics***

I saved this potential peril for last, not because it is less important than the others, but because it may not pertain to all administrators. That is, not all administrators have spouses or other significant partners, so in those cases this point may be more moot. My caveat here is that the spouses of administrators are a significant influence on how well friend/subordinate relationships work.

First, sometimes it is the spouses of the administrator and the subordinate who actually are close friends. The administrator and the subordinate may find themselves spending time together in social settings, not because they themselves particularly bond, but because their spouses do. Second, the administrator and subordinate may handle the dynamics raised in this article superbly—but their spouses may not.

Consequently, it is important that the administrator who chooses to have subordinates/friends take responsibility beyond just the two direct parties. Rather, he/she needs to take deliberate steps to help ensure that the respective spouses handle the situation in mature and healthy ways. This can be quite difficult in some situations, of course; and the further the dynamic is removed from the direct parties involved, the more potential for problems to arise. While I firmly believe that all individuals are responsible for their own behavior, there does exist a special degree of responsibility that the administrator, in particular, possesses in this situation. He/she holds the key power and must exercise due diligence that all facets raised in this article are addressed—by himself/herself, the subordinate/friend, and the respective spouses, if they are involved.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Michael W. Firmin** earned his Ph.D. from Syracuse University and serves as professor and Chair of the Psychology Department at Cedarville University in Cedarville, Ohio. He is a licensed psychologist in the State of Ohio and has taught

college at the undergraduate and graduate level for nineteen years. Dr. Firmin has over 100 journal article publications and presentations at national research conferences, directs a national research conference, and serves as a journal editor.