

Supervisor-Subordinate Friendships

The Effects of Promotion on Peer Relationships

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Abstract

Research shows that friendships at work are important because of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and job performance (Sias, 2005). While friendships can and do start between people at different levels of authority (Boyd and Taylor, 1998), their relationships are often strained when the power difference becomes salient (Sias, 2004). This study focuses on the different communication tactics used to negotiate the supervisor-subordinate friendship, specifically when the supervisor was once the subordinate's peer before a promotion occurred. Through a survey of respondents from various organizations, we examined how communication is used to negotiate the roles of the supervisor-subordinate friendship.



Method

•Participants

- 75 participants provided useable data
- 75% Female, 25% Male
- 77% ages 20-29
- 59% completed Some College, 24% a Bachelors Degree, 17% Other

•Procedure

- Convenience Sampling
- WebSurvey

•Measures

Interpersonal Solidarity Scale

Wheeless, L.R. (1978). A follow-up study of the relationships among trust, disclosure, and interpersonal solidarity. *Human Communication Research*, 4, 143-157.

- Feelings of closeness between people are measured based on their shared sentiments, similarities, and behaviors. People with strong solidarity should trust, like, and self-disclose to one another.
- Reliability Before Promotion: $\alpha = .93$ (M = 100.2, SD = 16.94)
- Reliability After Promotion: $\alpha = .97$ (M = 94.51, SD = 23.68)
- The scale is a 7-point Likert Scale with statements such as:
 - We are very close to each other
 - I trusted this person completely
 - We did not really understand each other

Role Negotiation Scale

- Researchers developed a scale to measure how friendship roles are negotiated in supervisor-subordinate relationships. Scale items were created based on information collected from related studies.
- Reliability Before Promotion: $\alpha = .71$ (M = 49.21, SD = 4.54)
- Reliability After Promotion: $\alpha = .83$ (M = 47.91, SD = 5.52)
- The scale is a 5-point Likert Scale with statements such as:
 - My friend gave me feedback
 - My friend and I frequently talked about subjects not related to work
 - My friend questioned my decisions

Results

RQ1: Can a peer friendship survive after a member of the dyad is promoted and becomes the supervisor of his/her friend?

Result:

A paired samples t-test showed a significant difference between both interpersonal solidarity and role negotiation.

Solidarity: $t = 2.64(75)$, $p < .05$
 Role Negotiation: $t = 2.66(75)$, $p < .05$

RQ2: Is there a difference in Interpersonal Solidarity and Role Negotiation between those who were promoted and those whose friend was promoted?

Result:

There were no differences.

RQ3: Is there a relationship between perceived importance of workplace friendships and interpersonal solidarity and role negotiation, and with perception of the relationship as better or worse after the promotion?

Result:

A Pearson Correlation showed perceived importance and interpersonal solidarity and role negotiation are related before a promotion, but not after.

Solidarity Before: $r = .27$, $p < .05$
 Role Before: $r = .31$, $p < .01$

The longer individuals were friends before the promotion, the more likely they perceived their friendship as being better after the promotion.

$r = .23$, $p < .05$

RQ4: Is friendship longevity associated with role negotiation and solidarity?

Result:

The relationship between longevity and role negotiation before and after and solidarity before and after is significantly related.

Role Before: $r = -.28$, $p < .05$
 Role After: $r = -.24$, $p < .05$
 Solidarity Before: $r = -.53$, $p < .001$
 Solidarity After: $r = -.30$, $p < .01$

RQ5: Is perception of the relationship as better or worse after a promotion related to role negotiation and interpersonal solidarity?

Result:

Perception of the relationship is related to role negotiation after a promotion.

$r = -.23$, $p < .05$

RQ6: Is there a difference between those who are still friends and those who are not on interpersonal solidarity and role negotiation?

Result:

There was a significant difference on solidarity between those who are still friends and those who are not after promotion. An independent samples t-test showed:

$t = 3.86$, $p < .001$
 Still Friends: M = 5.17, SD = 1.07
 No Longer Friends: M = 3.67, SD = 1.56



Discussion

•Conclusion

A workplace friendship *can* survive if one member of the dyad is promoted and becomes the supervisor of their friend. However, while the friendships survived many of the relationships changed either positively or negatively. Notably, interpersonal solidarity is significantly affected by a promotion. The results indicate that variables such as the length of the friendship prior to the promotion was positively related to the friendship surviving.

•Implications

Previous research has focused on friendship deterioration after a promotion occurs; however, results of this study indicated that most friendships survive. Maintaining a friendship after a promotion is an indication of successful role negotiation.

•Suggestions for Future Research

- What influence does the culture of an organization have on whether or not friends are able to successfully negotiate their friendship post-promotion?

