

OPINION

LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP



By Fusi Akinkugbe

Be a Leader not a Friend

- You avoid conflict. This is because you don't want to do anything that will upset your relationship with them. You place your relationship or friendship with your employees or subordinates over every other thing.

- It becomes more difficult to make the hard decisions that will benefit the group. Because you have so highly prioritised your relationships, taking decisions that benefit the group or organisation rather than individuals become difficult.

- You don't set clear expectations, and this results in mixed signals that undermine your leadership.

- You ultimately fail those around you because you don't help them become the best they can be.

- You also set yourself up to fail in your role as leader because you are unable to do what it takes to ensure the vision and goals are achieved.

These are some of the things that happen when you try to be a friend instead of a leader.

Secondly, seek respect not popularity from those you lead. It is a mistake to seek the popularity of subordinates as Theodore Roosevelt learned (before he became President of the United States of America). When he was assistant Secretary for the Navy, and

war was declared on Spain in 1898, he resigned his position and volunteered for the army, where he was second in command in one of three volunteer regiments set up to supplement the army. The regiment was put through a crash train-

ing course prior to being deployed, and during this course Roosevelt learned an important lesson. In his bid to seek popularity with his men, Roosevelt would relax with them without creating clear boundaries. His immediate boss admonished him about this, pointing out his mistake. Roosevelt "realized that while he had gained the affection of his troops, he had not established the proper space between himself and his men" In his own words, he said "...it is the greatest possible mistake to seek popularity." This experience taught him how important it was to strike the right balance between affection for

him by his troops and their respect for him. Finally, don't try and be friends with your direct reports. Someone in a case study of Michael Jordan's transition from basketball player to team owner shared this lesson: "A boss should

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always treat people with dignity and respect. But a boss should not try and be friends with his or her direct reports. If you attempt to straddle the line and remain a friend while becoming a boss there is a good chance you will lose the friendship - and be an ineffective leader". As the owner of the NBA's Charlotte Hornets, Michael Jordan became not only a team owner but also a member of the committee of owners that negotiates revenue sharing contracts with the NBA Players Association. Though he used to be a player, he was now an owner sitting on the other side of the table when it came to

financial negotiations with players of which he used to be one. In other words, the interests he now represented had totally changed. It would not have been in his own interest to continue to behave like a player when he was no longer one. When you try to be friends with those you lead, you risk not only losing the friendship, but also not being effective as a leader.

Being a leader and being a friend of those we lead are mutually exclusive. It is either one or the other. People need leadership, and this requires us to do what is needed such as taking a difficult decision that impacts someone negatively or shaking things up for the team's benefit. If friendship with team members takes priority over our leadership role,

we are unlikely to succeed as leaders. I acknowledge this is more difficult in our environment where lines of relationships are easily blurred, and the boundaries created by a leader can be easily misunderstood.

If you are in a leadership position, you should think of the purpose and needs of your team and let this be the underlying consideration for every decision. Trying to be popular results in a focus on narrow interests, which will undermine you as a leader. Leadership requires your being able to take the right decisions (no matter how hard), even if the cost means being labelled negatively and being seen as unpopular. If you want to be popular you will do things that please people in the short-term, but someone who wants to be respected will think of the long term and do the difficult things that are required even if people don't immediately understand or accept them.

Let me leave you with this question: Are you able to take difficult decisions even if those decisions will make you unpopular or do you avoid taking difficult decisions because you don't want to be unpopular?

Thank you and until next week, let me challenge you to Begin to Lead from where you are.

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