

Testing the friendship

Sue White explains how to handle your drinking buddy becoming your boss.

Business owner Todd Wright knows full well the challenges of working with friends: his marketing company, Threesides, goes out of its way to employ them.

"When we started, we actively sought to employ people we were friends with from past jobs," he says. "We've employed three friends to date."

He's also added family to the mix. "I also formed a partnership with my brother, which adds another degree of complexity – you have to stay friends with him or he's liable to tell Mum at Christmas."

Luckily, there's a method to Wright's apparent madness.

"The advice we've been given is employ on attitude and train for skills; being friends is the ultimate test for attitude," he says.

While it's proving successful for Wright's business, when your friend becomes your boss things don't always work out so well. An organisational psychologist at Inspirational Workplaces, Helen Crossing, says she's seen it go belly up plenty of times.

"Manufacturing companies [selecting] team leaders or foremen is generally ... where I see the most grief," she says. "There might be 15 to 20 people working at the same level and then one is picked out and made the leader."

The result often depends on how the new leader copes. "It depends on how good the manager is,"

Crossing says. "If they're dreadful, show favouritism or are overly harsh [expect problems]."

She says colleagues who are in a manager/subordinate situation when one is promoted need the system on their side for the friendship to remain intact.

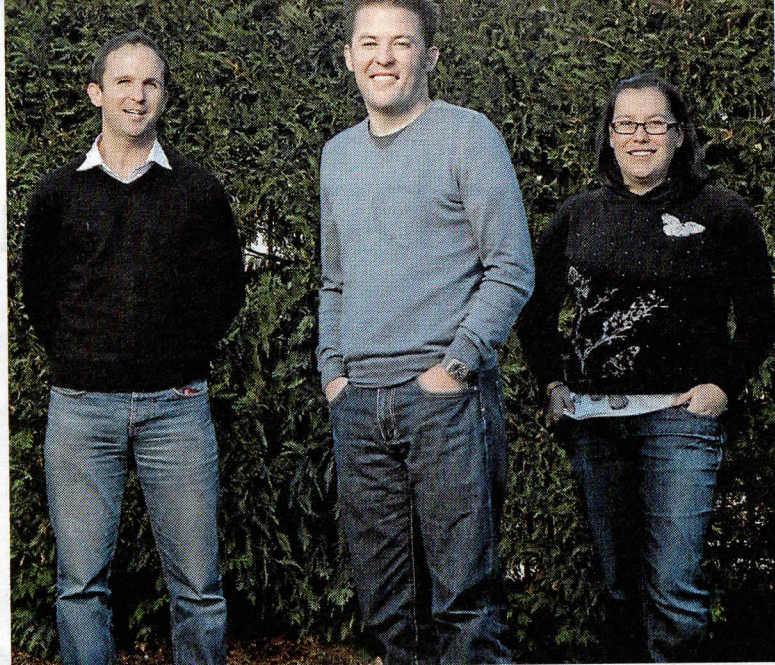
"Professional services firms and financial institutions, where the roles are very clearly defined and lots of processes are in place, are probably easier for people to find a balance," she says. "In organisations where there are performance review systems and structure around feedback, [those] formal systems help control the bias."

Nonetheless, she says being mates with the boss is fraught with problems. "You can be on friendly terms but, generally, an effective boss has a degree of distance between [them and] the people who report to them," she says. "There needs to be a sense of boundary."

Without the buffer of a big firm, Wright has come up with solutions that work on a smaller scale.

"We have this conversation during the recruitment process," he says. "We say we value our friendship more than the relationship of employment. You can find a job anywhere but it's really tough to find lifelong friends."

He also needs to be mindful that employees coming in "cold" aren't left out. "You need to make sure it's not a schoolyard situation when



Platonic focus ... Clint Wright, Todd Wright and Katherine Stanton, from marketing company Threesides, say strong friendship values help business. Photo: Andrew Meares

someone's not part of the group," he says. "We give them the whole background [in the interview] but it's something we need to be mindful of."

Wright has also learnt to draw the line when socialising.

"You need to ensure you aren't talking work or you'll feel that you have never left the office," he says. "We sometimes have a defined business conversation outside work but always ask, 'Can we talk work for a second?' and give the right of refusal."

While Wright's ability to set boundaries and outline expectations means employing friends has worked well, a national director at SHL, Stephanie Christopher, says research shows people don't necessarily want to be friends with their manager.

"You need to believe the person you are working for is developing you in your career [but our research shows] it's probably more about 'respect' than 'like,'" she says.

For new managers, getting the balance right can be challenging.

"Organisations often tell managers, 'We want you to manage productivity and cut costs,' whereas

what the team wants more than anything is recognition for a job well done, feedback and coaching," Christopher says.

By setting up an environment of openness and honesty, Wright says tough situations become easy to handle. "During early stages of business we needed an extra set of hands and employed one of my brother's friends," he says. "It was great on a casual basis but over six to 12 months our business grew and professionalised. He was studying at uni and taking it pretty easy and we had to look at performance management."

After building up to the inevitable hard conversation, the brothers called their friend/employee in for a chat.

"He came in and before we spoke he said, 'Clearly it's not working and I'm not enjoying it, so why don't I do something else? And what are we doing this weekend?'" Wright says.

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