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## Management Review

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# Friend, Foe, Ally, Adversary ... or Something Else?

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REPRINT NUMBER 46404

# Friend, Foe, Ally, Adversary ... or Something Else?

To succeed, executives must manage a myriad of relationships with their subordinates, colleagues, bosses and others. People who are adept at doing so can, for instance, better

navigate the organizational politics at their companies. However, executives who lack such interpersonal skills are prone to misreading important situations. They might, for example, count on a colleague's crucial support that then fails to materialize. Indeed, the ability to manage work relationships effectively is often what differentiates executives who make it to the top rungs of the corporate ladder from those who don't.

For more than 20 years, we have worked with hundreds of senior executives in dozens of industries. Many of those individuals have a keen intuitive sense of how best to deal with others. The majority, though, need some guidance because they lack an effective framework for accurately classifying — let alone developing strategies for — their work relationships. At most, they might categorize co-workers as friends, foes and neutrals, but that view is far too simplistic, leading to bad misjudgments and costly mistakes. Instead, we have found that work relationships can be defined along one of two continuums: unconditional and conditional, each requiring a different set of strategies.

## Unconditional Relationships

Relationships that are independent of situation and context are called “unconditional.” At one end of this spectrum are friends; at the other end are enemies. In the United States, where practically everyone is on a first-name basis, people use the word “friend” so broadly that it has become

almost meaningless. Here we define a friendship as a relationship of unconditional trust. In contrast, an enemy — as we define it — is someone who continually works against another person's interests *regardless* of the circumstances. In other words, the relationship is one of unconditional antagonism. In a galaxy of constantly changing relationships, friends and enemies are the two North Stars.

If sturdy fences make for good neighbors, then solid contracts make for strong strategic partnerships. But friends have no need for such safeguards to trust each other. Of course, the business world is contingency-driven, goal-oriented and unpredictable, and such environments are hardly conducive to establishing friendships. In fact, friendships between executives tend to arise *despite* the business environment and not because of it. To paraphrase a line from Harry Truman, if you want a friend in the corporate world, get a dog.

Instead, the corporate world is much better suited for making enemies. For one thing, in a world of uncertainty, many executives find a kind of comfort in the existence of others who are continually working against their interests. Indeed, having enemies can help people define themselves, often bringing an added zest to their professional lives, and this phenomenon can easily occur at the organizational level as well. In the late 1980s, for example, Lotus Development Corp.'s intense antipathy toward Microsoft Corp. became a rallying point for many employees.

Moreover, people tend to favor negative feedback over indifference (although, of course, they much prefer positive reinforcement). That helps explain why some executives almost seem to go out of their way to turn others, even potential partners, into enemies. This raises another key difference between friends and enemies —

To manage relationships with subordinates, colleagues, bosses and others, executives first need to know how to classify those people accurately.

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namely, the issue of control. Even high-powered executives cannot easily control whether a colleague becomes their friend, but they can quickly turn almost anyone into their enemy, either deliberately or unintentionally.

### Conditional Relationships

Although the most intense (and often the most time-consuming) connections are those with friends and enemies, the vast majority of business relationships are conditional, with allies and adversaries on opposite ends of the spectrum. Allies will work toward a person's best interests as long as it also serves their own self-interest to do

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so. In contrast, adversaries will work against someone because their self-interest conflicts with the other person's interests. The most important thing about such relationships is their transitory nature. An ally can easily turn into an adversary (and vice versa), given a change in circumstances. The ally-adversary continuum in relationship management is similar to the organizational concept of "co-opetition," in which companies might compete in one product line while cooperating with each other as part of a consortium in another industry segment and perhaps even establishing a joint venture in yet another market.

Ally and adversary relationships often have a strong emotional component, which can be a source of considerable confusion. On the one hand, an executive who has a warm personal relationship with an ally or close associate might be lulled into forgetting how quickly that relationship could sour if the self-interest of the two parties begins to diverge. On the other hand, an executive who harbors seething animosity toward an adversary could also fail to realize that, with the right change in circumstances, the relationship might eventually become mutually beneficial.

### The Common Pitfalls

A framework that distinguishes between unconditional and conditional relationships can help

managers avoid crucial mistakes in their dealings with others. In our experience, we have found that even senior executives are prone to the following five pitfalls.

#### **Mistake 1: Assuming a Friendship When None Exists**

After executives are fired or laid off, they often become disappointed and bitter when former colleagues are slow to return phone calls and offer little help in finding a new job. Any feelings of betrayal, however, are more likely a result of errors in classifying those people as friends when they were really just allies. It is important to remember that former allies will once again become allies when it serves their interests. Thus, becoming angry at them for any lack of support during an interim period serves no useful purpose.

Assuming a friendship when none exists can also result in political damage.

Consider James, the vice president of retail banking at a financial-services firm, who sent an e-mail satirizing the CEO's management style to a colleague, the senior vice president of strategy. (Note: To protect the confidentiality of our clients, we have used pseudonyms and have altered any identifying details.) That e-mail somehow found its way to the CEO, and James felt extremely betrayed because he had considered the SVP of strategy to be a friend. But the unfortunate situation was really more a consequence of James' incorrect classification of the relationship than it was any action on the SVP's part.

Even seasoned executives sometimes make the mistake of confusing an ally or close associate for a friend. Case in point: Michael Ovitz, formerly one of the most powerful men in Hollywood. Before he joined the Walt Disney Co. Ltd. as Michael Eisner's hand-picked successor, Ovitz was head of a major talent agency in Los Angeles. Because of the two men's respective positions at the time, they were frequently in adversarial roles during specific contract negotiations, yet this did not prevent them from developing a close personal connection, their families often vacationing together. But after Ovitz came on board at Disney, he soon realized that he had seriously misjudged their relationship. The two men clashed continually, leading to Ovitz's acrimonious departure.

Because of the transitory and contingency nature of work relationships, people might have many close associates but few true friends in their professional lives. Thus, unless an executive is absolutely certain that a colleague is a friend, he should assume that the person is, at best, an ally whose loyalty could quickly evaporate depending on the situation.

**Mistake 2: Misclassifying Adversaries** One of the trickiest problems in relationship management is the accurate classification of adversaries, who are often mistaken for enemies. Remember that adversaries will side with you if it is in their best interest to do so, whereas true enemies are always against you. The following question can help differentiate between the two: Within the last 18 months, was there a time when your opponent supported you or advanced your objectives? If the answer is yes, but only when that person had an ulterior motive, then consider the individual to be an adversary. If the answer is no, the person is very likely an enemy.

Accurate diagnosis is difficult because most enemies masquerade as adversaries. For example, consider the following remark: “I personally like Jane. She’s very competent technically, but she might not be the best person to head our research lab.” That statement might seem benign enough, but few enemies would be so blunt to say what they’re really thinking: “Jane is a disaster. She absolutely has to go, and there’s nothing anybody can do to change my mind.” One tip-off is that enemies often define their opponents in symbolic terms, such as, “The problem with Jane is that she represents a 20th century approach to R&D, and we need someone who can move us into the 21st century.” With that statement, Jane is no longer a person but a symbol of something undesirable, making it difficult for her to defend herself.

Distinguishing between enemies and adversaries is crucial because the two types of relationship require completely different strategies. Details of each are discussed in the following two mistakes.

**Mistake 3: Failing to Convert Adversaries Into Allies** Adversaries can quickly become allies when it serves their self-interest. At many companies, the

vice president of sales has an antagonistic relationship with the head of manufacturing because the functional responsibilities of the two positions often require those executives to lock horns, especially if manufacturing cannot fill orders in the time frame that salespeople would like. One way for an organization to minimize such conflicts might be to change the compensation system from a bonus based on sales volume or manufacturing efficiency to one based primarily on the company’s stock price. Remember that all relationships with adversaries and allies are contingency-based. Change the contingencies and you change the relationship.

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But many executives convert their adversaries into enemies instead of allies. Consider Sheila, the general counsel of a biotech company, who was fired by the CEO. The experience was painful and humiliating — she was escorted out the door by security guards — making it difficult for her to let go of her feelings of anger. Two years after her dismissal, she ran into the CEO at an association function. He smiled and extended his hand, but she refused to shake it and walked away. Later, when Sheila was being considered for a board position at another organization, the CEO went out of his way to give her a negative reference. Sheila’s earlier snubbing of the CEO may have given her some emotional satisfaction, but it also helped convert an adversary into an enemy. After her firing, she could have instead used the CEO as an ally by asking him for assistance in her job search. The simple but painful lesson for Sheila is that treating someone like an enemy will eventually turn that person into one.

**Mistake 4: Trying to Convert Enemies** Executives often expend considerable resources, including valuable political capital, trying to convert enemies into allies, but that effort is usually futile. Powerful emotional bonds exist between enemies, whose conflict typically provides self-definition and predictability in an uncertain world. Those

bonds can be extremely difficult to break. In other words, enemies tend to remain enemies.

When executives must deal with an enemy, they should first look for any allies or neutrals around that person. The goal is to isolate the enemy politically, thus defusing his power (at least for the time being). Consider Paula, the director of a critical profit-and-loss center, who became anxious and worried when Ralph, one of

fied 50 key people, keeping in touch with these individuals twice a year would require just two phone calls per week. These calls might simply be informal chats inquiring how those people are doing, but executives should also be on the lookout for ways to reinforce the benefits an ally accrues from maintaining the relationship. One tactic is to provide allies with opportunities to network with other senior executives, for example, by inviting them to the corporate box at a sporting event.

For executives in sales and marketing, determining who is an important ally is fairly straightforward. Those executives only need to identify the individuals associated with their five

largest sources of revenue during the last 12 months and over the past three years. Any person who authorized such purchases should be included, but it's important to also consider people who might have been instrumental in gaining access to those individuals. For other executives, identifying top allies is a bit more complicated, but an effective approach is to look at one's performance objectives and the weights attached to each. Then one must ask, Who are the in-house as well as external people most closely associated with the achievement of those objectives?

ACCORDING TO A Chinese proverb attributed to Confucius, "The beginning of wisdom is to call things by their right names." Indeed, in the early phases of an intellectual discipline, the assignment of names or categories tends to be broad and imprecise. As the field evolves, it develops classification schemes that provide intellectual rigor, facilitating future discourse that then helps refine the models used. The study of relationship management might be in its infancy, but a framework that distinguishes between unconditional and conditional relationships provides a good step for advancing the discussion.

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## Perhaps the biggest mistake executives make is to fail to maintain important alliances. Those relationships are contingency-based and should not be taken for granted.

her peers, was promoted to become her boss. The two had a hostile relationship, and her worst fears were confirmed when she asked her new boss how she could best be of assistance. Ralph's response was, "First prove yourself to me, and then I'll tell you." But rather than work directly with him, she conveyed her misgivings to the CEO and COO, counting on their wanting her to remain with the company rather than jump ship to a competitor. Initially, her bet paid off, as Ralph subsequently became much more cordial. Often, though, such tactics are merely stopgap measures because of the unconditional nature of enemy relationships. As it turned out, Ralph eventually created a situation that was untenable for Paula, leading to her resignation.

**Mistake 5: Taking Allies for Granted** Perhaps the biggest mistake that executives make in managing their relationships is that they fail to maintain important alliances. Remember that relationships with allies are contingency-based, so their support should never be taken for granted. Of course, because of time constraints and work demands, executives simply can't be in regular contact with all of their allies. But as a general rule of thumb, they should at least be in touch with the top 20%. The goal is this: None of an executive's top allies should ever feel that the only time they're being contacted is when their help is needed.

In practice, staying in touch with important allies is often less time-consuming than might be expected. For example, if an executive has identi-

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