

Phony Professional Phriends

By Paperitalo Staff

I am lucky. I have many friends I have made over the years in my professional work (and a few enemies, too, I should say). However, two friends stand out. The first one I met in 1977, the second one in 1978. I have kept in touch with these two men down through the years. I have worked for the first one in several capacities over the years. At various times when I personally needed help, he was there. Once, he almost reassigned and relocated me to even further out in the boondocks than I was, but I was ahead of the game and took another job.

The second one says that one time I saved his life. He has worked for me several times, and he had to fire me once. I have fired him twice. I talked to both of them as recently as last week.

If either of these two needed me, I would drop everything and go to them. I know they would do the same for me.

These two are not phony—they are the real deal.

However, you will (and I have) run into many professional phonies. Sales people are near the top, but you'll find internal candidates in your business, too. These are people who feint interest in your personal life to gain some sort of favored intention with you.

As I said, some (certainly not all) sales people are of this ilk. In fact, and you may already know this, some companies require their sales people to gather information about prospects' and customers' personal lives and put it into their CRM software. You know, things like birthdays of spouses and kids, when the kids are going to graduate from high school and so forth. With this information then, anyone in that company can call you up and wish you a happy birthday, make you feel important, endear themselves to you. Test of sincerity? Drop their products and they will forget you ever existed.

Internal folks can do this, too. Subordinates can become overly solicitous about your well-being, either to curry favor or cover up their incompetence. I had an employee once when I was a young manager say, "Hello, boss!" every time he saw me in the hallway of the large building where we worked. He thought he was being nice or cute or something. Irritated the daylights out of me. I fixed it by creating a response, "Hello, subordinate!" What he was doing was just plain inappropriate.

Us oldsters have seen enough of this phony friendship act to raise our antenna when we detect it may be about to be foisted on us once again (you youngsters will be caught by it a few times before you catch on). Yet, there is a caution for the old timers, too. You may raise your defenses too high too fast in the case of someone with a genuine interest in you. We may shut down someone in need of a genuine mentor who looks up to us. And I do believe we owe it to the rising generations to be a mentor to those coming along. Looking back on it, I know I had mentors that I didn't even know I had—I was too ignorant at the time to even recognize it. In the late 1990s, I was reflecting back on my very early professional days and recognized that I had a mentor that I had not treated as well as I should have. Thought I would find him, call him up and make amends. His wife answered the phone. She told me he had died a number of years before. He was good to me and helped me out greatly early in my career and I never thanked him.

Now, I have stayed away from one obvious topic here—the special problems of friendships amongst the genders. This one would take a book. I'll just say this to you men (I won't pretend to understand a woman's point of view on this subject)—if you have reached the age where you are hankering for and can afford a red sports car, stroll down to your human resources department and ask them about the laws and your company's policies around sexual harassment. I am not saying genuine platonic friendships cannot be built across this chasm, just be aware you are walking this gorge on a tightrope, not a sturdy four-lane bridge. Carry on, Nik Wallenda.

For safety this week, it is tough to be an EMT and be called to aid a friend. In your next safety meeting, it might be worth talking about how to be professional when the life in the balance is that of a dear friend.

Be safe and we will talk next week. ##