



Letters on Leadership #6: Friends and Teammates

There is a pervasive myth in today's teams and organizations. Many people think that in order to have a great organization everyone needs to be friends. This is not the case. If we are going to compete for championships on the athletic field, battle field, and corporate boardroom we need great *teammates*. Friends and teammates are not synonymous. I have friends with whom I share a great deal in common. We share the same interests, the same sense of humor. We will go to the movies together, go fishing together, and drink beer together. I wouldn't go to battle with them though. I wouldn't trust them to watch my back in Iraq, cover my blindside on the Football field, or bring our organization to the next level. I don't hold them accountable nor do they hold me accountable. Our friendship is based on shared interests not a commitment to a higher purpose. I wouldn't say anything if they missed a workout or showed up late for an appointment. My teammates hold me accountable, and I them. They do so because they truly care about me and the success of our organization.



I have had teammates in the military who were not my friends. We didn't have the same interests outside the military. We did not share the same sense of humor, or taste in movies and music. I didn't call them at night to tell them about my day. We didn't hang out on the weekends. We weren't friends. However, I was willing to shed my blood for them on the battlefield without a moment's hesitation. I knew they cared about me *because* they held me accountable, not in spite of it. Our relationship wasn't built on shared interests but rather a commitment to our unit, a commitment to each other that we were going to make each other reach our full potential.

Some of my best friends are also my teammates. Football teammates, men and women with whom I served, and my teammates at The Program. I count these among my most cherished friends. However, the distinction is clear. They are teammates first and foremost. Making the distinction between friends and teammates is never easy. In 2005 I was in a place called An Najaf, Iraq. During the first day of a month-long battle I listened to the radio in horror as they called in an Urgent Surgical Casualty Evacuation (the most serious kind, meaning that without immediate surgery death is expected) on my best friend. We had been roommates and friends for years. We had the same interests, the same sense of humor. He was hit with a Rocket Propelled Grenade while taking cover behind a wall in the Najaf Cemetery. I listened as my best friend lay broken, bleeding, and possibly dying in the dirt. I did nothing. Yes, we were friends. But, more importantly we were teammates. We had made a commitment to our Country, our Corps, and our Marines. I knew that the best thing I could do for him at that moment was to continue to fight, to trust that his teammates would take care of him, and to accomplish our mission. During the preceding years we may have gone to movies and drank beer together. However, we also pushed each other to get better. We held each other accountable to the highest standards. We may have had conflict at times because of it, but I know that I came home alive from 3 combat tours because he and other teammates made me better every day. I'd like to think that he was able to persevere through over 30 surgeries because I and other teammates made him tougher.



If we are going to be a great (not good) organization, if we are going to compete for championships, we need great teammates. Great teammates hold each other accountable to the standards of their organization. *I go to the movies with my friends. I go to battle with my teammates.*

Attack!

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"Letters on Leadership" are published periodically by The Program, a leadership development and team building company that works with the nation's leading corporations as well as professional and collegiate athletic teams.

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