

HR Professionals Can Be Friendly Without Being Friends

HR Bartender | Sharlyn Lauby | January 5, 2025



Image captured by Sharlyn Lauby while exploring the streets of Nashville, TN

I've been seeing some postings on LinkedIn of a person holding a sign with a comment about HR. Honestly, I assume it's some sort of advertisement for HR related products or services. But one of the signs stuck out for me – it said something to the effect of "HR is not your friend."

On some level, it's true – HR isn't. In many organizations, the human resources department acts as the eyes and ears of the workforce. They're supposed to know what employees are thinking and feeling. Companies use HR's feedback to understand what employees enjoy about their work and quickly address issues when they occur.

Just because HR isn't your friend, it doesn't mean they can't be friendly. If HR is expected to know what the workforce is thinking, they need to have a rapport with employees. This can be a tricky subject. HR wants employees to share their thoughts while, at the same time, they don't want to get too close. At every level of the organization, HR needs to be viewed as objective and impartial.

So, how can HR professionals come across as friendly without being criticized for not being friends? Here are five things to consider:

- Set expectations about the role of HR. While HR departments have similar functions, it's reasonable to think that every organization views HR's role a little differently. Human resources departments would be well served to explain their role during the hiring process and orientation. Help employees understand how to best use HR.
- Be approachable and authentic. Contrary to how some media outlets might portray HR, we are human. We take our jobs seriously. We also love a good joke and like to have fun. It's perfectly acceptable to let employees see the fun and human side of HR. Employees are willing to open up and talk to people they have a connection with.
- Have a personal social media policy. In today's technology driven workplaces, it's important to have a personal philosophy on who you will connect, friend, like, etc. on social media channels. This isn't the same as the company policy. There are several factors to consider such as the best way to handle disciplinary action if you're connected with an employee. HR pros need to ultimately decide the best way to handle social media requests.
- Have a personal practice regarding company events. Whether it's an afternoon coffee in the breakroom or adult beverages after work, employee gatherings can build relationships and start conversations. HR is often invited and there's nothing wrong with making an appearance. But HR pros need to be keenly aware of the balance between stopping by and overstaying their welcome.
- Address any confusion directly. It's possible even after doing all of the things mentioned that an employee will misinterpret HR's role. Don't delay or be subtle about addressing the situation. Not confronting the issue directly could add to the confusion. Have a private conversation with the employee and explain. They will appreciate being treated in a respectful manner.

Human resources professionals need to create relationships at every level of the organization. Relationship management is a defined competency for HR pros in the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) body of applied skills and knowledge (BASK). So, have some fun, spend time with employees, and build a rapport within the organization. It's very possible to do this and still maintain professionalism and objectivity.