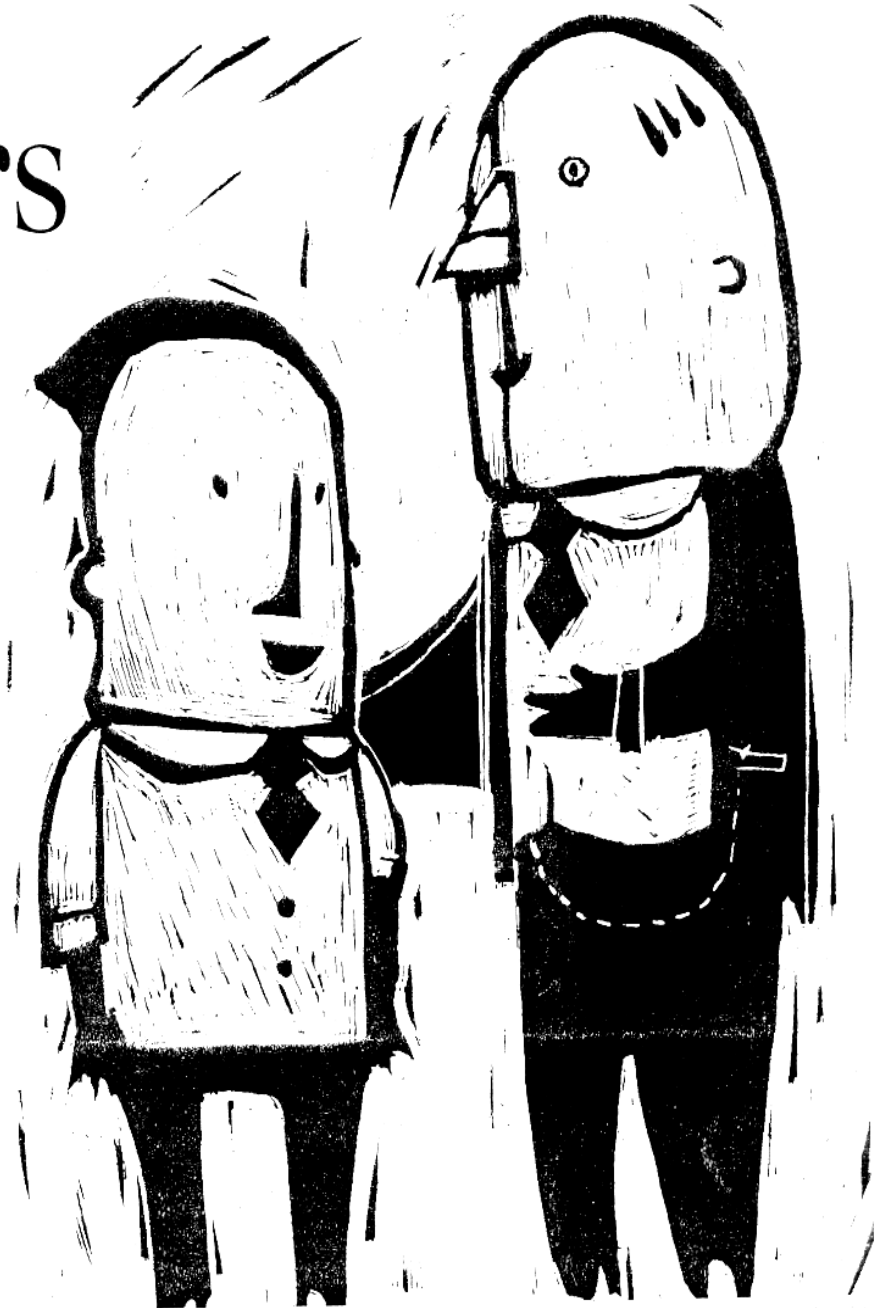


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Up close and
personal
gives edge
to managers



Employees really do want their bosses to know their business, **JOHN IZZO** argues

Conventional management wisdom teaches that managers should not become too close, friendly or personal with those who they manage.

Managers who get up close and too personal with employees, the theory goes, won't be able to manage in the tough, fair-handed way that is required. They may not be able to avoid playing favourites and may even be unwilling to fire employees when necessary.

But a growing body of research along with changes in employee attitudes — younger workers seem to have fewer boundaries between work and personal life — suggest that the opposite may in fact be true: The more a manager is perceived as knowing about and taking an interest in the personal lives of employees, the more engaged and committed employees will be.

Part of the reason for this shift in wisdom has to do with the changes in values we have about work and as a society as a whole.

We spend more time at work now than ever — many of us as much as two-thirds of our waking adult lives.

We also move more often, are less likely to live near extended families and have less time for social groups, such as churches and clubs.

That means the workplace has become a more important element of our social lives. Since we have less time for a social life outside of work, we want more personal relationships within it.

The idea of preferring an impersonal experience at work was born at a time when many of us tried hard to separate work and play. In 1975, a series of studies conducted in North America and Britain by the University of London suggested that few of us looked to the workplace for social friendships.

But just two decades later, having "best friends" at work and having a manager who "took an interest in your life and cared about you as a person" were among the strongest

predictors of an engaged employee, according to a 1998 Gallup study of more than 100,000 employees in the United States and Canada.

Interestingly, a part of the age-old wisdom turns out to be true. Extensive studies of worker attitudes have found little or no correlation between being friends with a manager and employee loyalty. What we really want is for our managers to take an interest in us as human beings, and know who we are outside of work is respected at work.

Many companies have recognized this need. At Total System Services, a credit-card processing company in Georgia which does a great deal of work in Canada, every new employee has a "first supper" with his or her manager. Managers have a very simple instruction to follow for the meal: Don't talk about work. Instead, find out about the new employee's family, hobbies, personal interests and dreams.

Setting aside space for workers to connect can also help. In many organizations, there is literally no space that isn't public for employees just to meet and socialize.

The offices of Radical Entertainment, a software developer in Vancouver, include a large, open space where employees can gather to share meals — provided by the company— and a replica of a log cabin, where they can sit in casual chairs and play video games.

The campus — yes, that's what the company calls it — of Microsoft Corp. offers similar areas for the integration of work and friendship.

Several years ago, I met an employee of Petro-Canada who proudly told me that he was the "most popular regional manager in the history" of his company.

After I goaded him about his level of humility, he shared one of his leadership secrets.

Every month, he can spend only about one hour at each of the 60 gas stations that report to him. When he gets there, "the first thing

I do is meet each person one-on-one and ask them what they are most excited about that is happening in their life, and they tell me all kinds of things — how they are going to school at night, about their kids' spelling bees and hockey success, and the things they care deeply about."

After leaving the station, he pulls out a tattered notebook and writes down the names of every person he

has talked to, along with the things he has learned about them.

On his next monthly visit, he reviews the book before heading into the station. Then he raises the things he learned on his previous visit and asks for more.

"Some people probably think that is a great gimmick. But it is not the notebook that has made me the most popular regional manager, it is because I actually care about

what is happening in people's lives. The notebook is just my way of keeping track."

Simple gestures can make a big difference. A manager at a commercial leasing company in Calgary told me that she begins every meeting with a time for people to share things happening outside of work of which they are proud.

A manager for Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce said that ev-

ery staff meeting she attends begins with people just "checking in" and talking about whatever is top of mind — much of it more personal than work-oriented.

And a nursing manager for the Foothills Hospital in Calgary told me that each week the nurses on her unit have a brown-bag lunch open to all team members. There is only one rule: Work talk is off limits.

Each of these managers told me how popular these simple practices are with employees.

There are other simple ways for managers to reinforce the personal connection at work. They can send congratulatory notes for personal achievements and milestones, publish newsletters that feature personal, not just organizational, highlights and circulate birthday cards, where fellow employees write one thing they most appreciate about the celebrant.

The list is endless but it all begins with an earnest desire to get to know people.

Get to know people how well, you may be asking. Should managers be concerned about becoming *too* personal?

It is best to watch the reactions of employees to questions about their personal lives, and let them know clearly that your interest is in addressing their needs more effectively. Be especially careful about questions relating to relationships, dating and other matters that might cross the line between a manager's legitimate interest and inappropriate intrusions.

Most of all, when in doubt, check it out. If an employee seems uncomfortable, then adjust accordingly. And if you have a personal friendship with an employee, try not to flaunt it, as it may lead to others to perceive favouritism, even if it is not there.

Beyond those caveats, it's worth getting up close and personal. So the next time some well-meaning trainer tells you not to get too chummy with your employees, think again.

Better yet, have a team lunch next week. But do yourself a favour: Make talk about work off limits.

John Izzo is an adviser to companies on corporate culture and leadership, and the co-author of Values Shift: The New Work Ethic.

Ways to get more personal with employees

Here are some simple ways for managers to get more personal:

- Send employees handwritten congratulatory notes for personal achievements outside of work — such as running a marathon or coaching a sports team.

- Have a social lunch with every new employee. But don't talk about work. Instead, just get to know the staffer and take notes later on.
- Start meetings with a brief check-in on what is happening in the lives of employees outside of their work.

- Celebrate personal accomplishments that have nothing to do with work at staff meetings.
- Have a designated place where people can gather and connect within the workplace.

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Know your staff

Here's a test of how well you know your employees.

Make a list of the people who report to you. Next to each name, answer the following questions:

- Do they have children? What are their names and ages?
- What are employees' favourite hobbies and pastimes outside of work?
- Where are they from? Do they still have family living there?
- Do they volunteer outside of work and if so, to what causes?
- What are they proudest of in their achievements outside of work?

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