

The Proper Distance Between Boss and Secretary

The Proper Distance Between Boss and Secretary

by Mortimer R. Feinberg and Aaron Levenstein

Manager's Journal

Most executives depend on their secretaries in two crucial ways. A good secretary makes sure her boss functions efficiently. (Despite the return of the male secretary, the present ratio of the sexes justifies use of the female personal pronoun.) She keeps his desk organized, plans his time, shields him from debilitating interruptions, makes sure nothing goes out over his signature that will embarrass him and keeps him apprized of scuttlebutt picked up in the ladies' room.

More significant may be the emotional support she gives him in times of crisis. This may prove even more helpful than the traditional secretarial duties, especially in the event of corporate infighting or economic setbacks for the company. Nevertheless, it is important for both executive and secretary that some distance be kept between them. The secretary owes her primary loyalty to the company that pays her—not to the individual. She should not be involved in discussions with an outside headhunter or otherwise put in a compromising position where her loyalty to company and boss will conflict. As the chief executive officer of a large conglomerate put it:

"The personal tie may make her vulnerable in the event that you retire or leave for another job. Never force her to choose between her commitment to you and her duty to the company. You have no right to expect her to throw herself on the funeral pyre like a Hindu widow committing suttee."

One of the purposes of a secretary is to relieve the executive of personal burdens and thus reduce pressure on his work. Contrary to feminist ideology, it is not demeaning for a secretary to prepare coffee, order sandwiches, etc. if she has been given to understand in the hiring interview that such personal services are part of her job. The executive can demonstrate that, in his view, the chore is not demeaning by doing the pouring himself from time to time.

But it is still important for the executive to draw a clear line between private and corporate functions. Your secretary shouldn't be required to handle personal checks, bank accounts, tax deductions, intimate personal correspondence and so on, except possibly in rare emergencies, such as illness in the family; The relationship will be contaminated if limits are left undefined.

When the executive wants a secretary who can listen to his woes and who will allow him to unload on her the pressures of the moment, the selection procedure is of the utmost importance. Interviewing, testing and checking of experience must be addressed to finding a mature person who can cope with stress. This type of secretary is likely to be qualified to serve as a chief of staff. In that case, she must be given appropriate assistance so that she is not overwhelmed by the daily chores of correspondence and telephone calls. She might even be given stock options and other management perks.

Even though you consider your secretary a confidante, she should not be involved in the factional conflicts of the organization. Don't make her listen to your invidious comments about your peers, superiors or subordinates. As one executive told us: "I have to exercise restraint to avoid burdening my secretary with uncomplimentary characterizations of associates. That is unprofessional. She may overhear arguments or abusive exchanges, and she knows where I stand, but I don't make her a captive audience for my hostilities."

Keep in mind that you are a role model to your subordinates, including your secretary. Be scrupulous in your behavior. Don't ask her to be a party to an abuse of the expense account. The executive who tells his secretary to put in a voucher for a nonbusiness lunch with friends right after using a fine-toothed comb on the vouchers of his subordinates generates cynicism and disrespect.

Many jokes in bad taste purport to describe the hostility of executives' wives and secretaries. The most famous example of such tension is the case of Mrs. Roosevelt and FDR's secretary, Missy LeHand. Joseph P. Lash, in his biography "Eleanor and Franklin," cites a journalist's description of "how Missy presided over the White House tea table when Mrs. Roosevelt was not there, how she wrote all of the President's private letters, did the accounts, paid the bills, balanced his checkbooks. saw that the children got their personal allowances, kept track of his stamp, marine-print, and rare-book collections, and ran the Little White House at Warm Springs 'when Mrs. Roosevelt can't be there.'"

These services, says Mr. Lash, were "beyond price" and helped the president immensely. But that his family paid a price is evidenced by the resentful statements of his children years later, though Mrs. Roosevelt herself suffered the displacement in silence. The executive who seeks to maintain a wholesome marriage should not permit his secretary to invade the prerogatives and functions of his spouse.

The extension of anti-discrimination laws to cover "sexual harassment" now adds a legal as well as moral deterrent to taking advantage of one's position as employer. Such misconduct is defined by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to "include unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature."

The term "verbal conduct" covers unwelcome off-color or suggestive remarks. A fairly typical policy statement by a Midwestern manufacturing company warns that management will not tolerate "solicitation, insults, comments, jokes, verbal or physical advances or other sexually based activities." Aware that such prohibitions exist, the executive must be sure to draw a line between coarseness and humor. When in doubt, self-censorship is the best policy. A respectful informality is a sound basis for a dignified and yet relaxed relationship. The individual who is all work and no play rarely pauses to notice his secretary's attractive new hairdo or to make comments like, "Where did you get that dress-from the Salvation Army?" A continuing relationship requires some element of lightness from time to time.

The executive must remember that every human relationship-even with one's spouse and children at home, but certainly with one's subordinates on the job-should not be all-consuming. The warmest of relationships will ultimately chill unless a certain area of individual privacy is reserved.

Finally, it should be noted that the executive has no claim to total and absolute commitment in what is, after all, an economic relationship. He must avoid fantasizing that he is emotionally indispensable to his secretary, and that she will dedicate herself single-mindedly to his needs.

Mr. Feinberg is chairman of BFS Psychological Associates, a New York consulting firm. Mr. Levenstein is professor emeritus of management at Baruch College.

Article ID: 94

Last updated: 13 Apr, 2013

Revision: 1

Feinberg Insights -> Published Articles -> The Proper Distance Between Boss and Secretary

<http://www.sliwainsights.com/kb/index.php?View=entry&EntryID=94>