

Leading Friends

by

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How can Richie Cunningham, the Fonzy and the classic TV serial *Happy Days* teach us something about leadership? As it turns out, a recently rerun episode on cable TV provided significant insights into the challenge of leading friends—an aspect of leadership that is prevalent at service academies and within ROTC units, but rarely addressed as a unique aspect of leadership.

In this *Happy Days* episode, Richie and his friends, Ralph and Potsie, are drilling with their JROTC squad. An arrogant, demanding, and self-aggrandizing classmate leads the squad. Richie, Ralph, and Potsie rebel against their leader and refuse to obey his orders. The squad disintegrates, prompting the JROTC Commander to relieve the squad leader and assign Richie in his place. Richie resists this promotion, knowing the almost impossible task he will face in leading his friends. Richie does his best to organize his friends and prepare them for the upcoming drill competition, but their reaction is typical—Ralph and Potsie remind Richie that they are all “buds” and there is no reason for Richie to take this new assignment too seriously. Richie, however, now feels the pressure of responsibility.

Richie realizes he needs some advice to see him through this challenge and approaches his Dad. Mr. Cunningham tells Richie to love his men and they will respond. He concludes by saying, “If they love you, they’ll do anything for you.” Richie takes this advice to heart and pours himself out for his friends—buying them meals at “Arnold’s,” the local hamburger establishment, and helping them do their chores. Ralph and Potsie are appreciative, but these acts of kindness do not translate into obedience on the drill field.

In frustration, Richie turns to his JROTC commander to get his take on leading friends. The commander is direct and firm. He tells Richie to be ruthless with his friends. “If they fear you, they’ll do anything for you.” Richie tries this approach with his friends and threatens to “place them on report and cause a delay in their JROTC graduation.” This method backfires, the squad mutinies and Ralph and Potsie disassociate themselves from Richie, labeling him: “the fink.”

In desperation, Richie goes to see the Fonzy—surely he must know the key to leading friends. The Fonzy looks up from his motorcycle and first reprimands Richie for being a fink (the word had spread rapidly!). Fonzy then tells Richie that if he is to lead his friends, he must be “cooooool.” Richie reflects on this advice and decides this means to go to his friends and level with them. He rips up the report sheets, speaks in a humble manner, and tells Ralph and Potsie that he cares about them and needs their help and

support for the drill competition. The result—his friends decide that Richie is worth supporting and they come through for him.

So what does it take to lead friends, particularly in an Academy or ROTC setting—loving them, bullying them, or just acting “coooooool”? Every midshipman and cadet who has been placed in a leadership position and required to lead friends has struggled with this question. These young leaders wonder whether the basic tenets of leadership apply in this setting or whether there is a different set of personal attributes and strategies required for leading friends.

The theme of this essay is that leading friends in an Academy or ROTC setting requires personal character traits and strategies common to other more traditional leadership situations, but adapted and emphasized for the unique dynamics associated with friend leadership. I will address: (1) a definition of friend leadership, (2) the unique characteristics of friend leadership, (3) the personal attributes required for successful friend leadership, (4) the strategies required for successful friend leadership, and (5) the way ahead to study and address this issue.

A definition of friend leadership

Friend leadership occurs when a peer, within a predominantly homogeneous group, is selected by someone outside the group to oversee, guide, and care for his group and accomplish objectives that are imposed externally, as well as developed internally. This homogeneous group is similar in age, experience, and expertise. Typically, the group has been together for an extended period of time and interacted as peers, without any senior-subordinate relationship. The peer who has been raised to a leadership position also has a number of close personal relationships with individuals within the group. Friend leadership is a distinct subset of peer leadership, differentiated by the group’s homogeneity and intimate social ties. When a West Point cadet becomes a Platoon Commander, when an Air Force Academy cadet becomes the Wing Commander, when a Naval ROTC midshipman becomes a Battalion Commander, these individuals will, by definition, be leading friends.

The unique characteristics of friend leadership

Friend leadership has a unique set of characteristics that cause this type of leadership to be particularly demanding. Though some of these attributes can be found in more traditional leadership settings, they have a tendency to dominate in friend leadership. These characteristics are:

- The friend leader is trying to find the balance between leading and maintaining friendships.
- The friend leader typically has limited leadership experience at the level to which appointed. This results in a crisis of confidence.

- The leader is experiencing loyalty tensions—the tension among loyalty to the organization, loyalty to the group, loyalty to individuals, and loyalty to himself.
- The friend leader has limited authority to punish or reward his subordinates.
- Some members of the group feel jealousy towards the appointed friend leader.
- Some members of the group question the selection process that elevated the peer to a leadership position.
- Conflict resolution between the friend leader and group members is particularly challenging.

Because of these unique attributes, friend leaders need to develop and demonstrate certain personal attributes and implement specific strategies to become successful. These attributes and strategies are outlined in the following sections.

The personal attributes required for successful friend leadership

The attributes presented are not unique to friend leadership, but take on an added importance when leading friends.

Humility: A humble friend leader has a much greater chance of connecting with his group and achieving mission and interpersonal success. Humility tends to diffuse conflict, make the leader approachable, and portray a picture of a peer who is more interested in the group and organization, than personal glory or achievement. The description of Level 5 leaders in Jim Collins’ book, Good to Great, captures the essence of this attribute. Collins describes Level 5 leaders, the ones who successfully transformed their organizations from mediocrity to sustained success, as those characterized by “personal humility and professional will.” Collins observes that these leaders “channel their ego needs away from themselves and into the larger goal of building a great company.”

The friend leader needs to credit his group for successes and take responsibility for group failures. Assuming responsibility for failure goes a long way in gaining the respect and loyalty of the group. The friend leader also needs to communicate by words and actions that he is not enamored with the trappings associated with the leadership position—whether those trappings are visible rank or special perks.

Moral courage: A friend leader must be a man or woman of integrity. A breach in this area, even with a seemingly minor compromise, will cause irreparable damage. This moral courage must translate into a willingness to always place others’ needs before the leader’s own comfort, prestige, or advancement. This moral courage needs to be consistent both downwards and upwards. For example, the friend leader must be equally faithful in confronting his superiors on behalf of the group, relaying an unpopular order or policy from his superior without criticism or complaint, or choosing a particularly close friend for an important job because that friend is best qualified. This takes moral courage and a willingness to “take the heat,” either from those above or those below.

Ultimately, the friend leader needs to be willing to risk temporary social rejection to retain an unblemished character.

Professionalism & Competency: The friend leader needs to set a professional example in appearance, speech, priorities, and actions. The leader must do this without becoming a “brown nose,” “butt shark,” or “joe.” The motivation for professionalism should not be for show or to impress one’s superiors, but instead for the good of the unit. Friends will quickly pick up duplicity or hypocrisy and reject a friend leader who has been “co-opted” by the establishment. Coupled with professionalism must be competency. The friend leader needs to demonstrate the ability to plan, decide, and act. If an important competency is lacking, the friend leader must take the initiative to address the deficiency.

Realistic Mindset: The friend leader must remain cognizant that he must lead by nurturing, supporting, listening, helping, and serving. The friend leader is in a position of authority, but must be ever aware of his roots and the temporary nature of his position. Warren Bennis’ image of herding cats is apropos for friend leaders. Bennis, in Managing People is Like Herding Cats, writes:

Cats, of course, won’t allow themselves to be herded. They may, however, be coaxed, cajoled, persuaded, adored, and gently led . . . Be humble. Stop trying to “herd cats” and start building trust and mutual respect. Your “cats” will respond. They will sense your purpose, keep your business purring, and even kill your rats.

Friend leaders must be mindful that their role is to build trust, not herd cats.

The strategies required for successful friend leadership

Friend leaders must not only demonstrate certain attributes, they must be armed with strategies that can facilitate their work. Like the attributes, these strategies are important in most leadership situations, but they are critical when leading friends.

Develop a compelling vision: People are hungry to become part of a movement larger than themselves. If the friend leader can develop a simple and compelling vision for the group, combined with a few achievable goals, he can gain buy-in from the group on the authority of the mission itself. The leader can continue to return to this vision to unify the group, generate excitement, and address deviations. Max DePree in Leading Without Power captures this thought when addressing leadership of volunteers:

Leadership among volunteers is rather dependent in beautiful ways on shared values and commitment, on understood visions expressed in workable mission statements, and on moral purpose.

Similar comments could be made about the unity found in many athletic teams where the team’s goal supplants the individual goals of the athletes.

The vision and goals should be developed with the full participation of the group, though the friend leader will ultimately need to narrow down the possibilities and articulate the direction.

Communicate: A friend leader must constantly communicate with his group. This communication must be less directive and more participative. The friend leader should spend time with people one-on-one and meet with sub-groups. For the friend leader, listening is much more important than talking. The group members want to know that the friend leader has a genuine interest in their lives, hears and understands their problems, and is willing to take action to address these problems. This will only occur through active listening.

Win over the group's informal leaders: There are always members of the group who do not hold an official position, but hold significant sway over others. The friend leader must be aware of these informal leaders, develop rapport with them and creatively win them to his side. The objective is to continue to develop a "critical mass of influence," where the peer pressure presses in a direction that supports the friend leader. Informal leaders are instrumental in achieving this critical mass.

Confront swiftly and with a consistent approach: When a member of the group is out-of-line, the friend leader cannot afford to look the other way. Ignoring a challenge to authority will undermine the leader and permit a rebellious cancer to spread. A method that works in the friend environment is the "4 step confrontation ladder." First, the friend leader approaches the offender one-on-one. The friend leader, in an informal setting, gently, but firmly explains the behavioral or attitudinal problem and asks the individual's support to correct the deficiency. Often, the offender will not realize the offense is a problem and correct it without any further mention. If the behavior or attitude continues, the friend leader should then enlist another member of the group who is well respected to go with him or her to confront the offender. The additional person helps the offender realize that this is not just a conflict between him and the friend leader; the offender now sees that others disapprove of his behavior or attitude. If this method does not work, the friend leader should return with his partner, sit down with the offender in a more formal setting and explain the specific consequences of a failure to conform. The last step is to use formal punishment. Often friend leaders are hesitant to use any type of formal punishment, even when it is warranted. The ladder, however, allows the friend leader to ratchet up the pressure on the group member in a logical and fair manner.

Tactical Actions

In addition to these four primary strategies, there are a number of other tactical actions that can assist the friend leader in his day-to-day leadership responsibilities:

- Recognize accomplishments in both public and private forums. Making the effort to arrange for a more senior individual to say words of congratulations to your group or present awards has a powerful effect.

- Say thank you to group members. A hand-written note, even to someone you see every day, makes a positive impression.
- Solve a friend's problem.
- Use the unique talents of your friends—give them responsibility and authority.
- Organize team building events like ultimate frisbee games, bowling tournaments, or golf outings.
- Celebrate birthdays and special events as a group.
- Attend events where a member of the group participates. Your presence says a lot and means a lot.

Coupling humility, moral courage, professional competence, and level-headedness with specific strategies and tactics, gives the friend leader a fighting chance to not only survive, but thrive in his position.

The way ahead

This essay is only an initial thought piece on friend leadership. The ideas presented are based on years of personal experience and observation. The next step is to develop a sound theoretical foundation derived from experimentation and field study. We should ask questions like:

- What is the relationship between successful friend leadership and personality type?
- What is the relationship between successful friend leadership and emotional intelligence?
- How do various management and leadership theories, such as power-influence, expectancy, and equity, apply to friend leadership?
- Are there other attributes and strategies that facilitate success in the friend leadership environment?
- How can a friend leader's superior best support the friend leader in the execution of his duties?
- How can a friend leader best support his friends in the execution of their duties?
- What is the relationship between successful friend leadership and successful leadership in other settings?
- Is there an optimal methodology to select and prepare friend leaders?

The study of friend leadership is a worthwhile endeavor. It is a dimension of leadership that requires more discussion and debate. Our midshipman and cadet leaders have the potential to influence their peers profoundly and increase the professional excellence of our Brigade, Corp, Wing, Regiments, Squadrons and Battalions; and by extrapolation, our operational units. These midshipman and cadet leaders need and deserve some principles and techniques to help them execute their responsibilities.

Additionally, friend leadership doesn't cease when we trade our academy and college brass for Ensign boards and 2nd Lieutenant bars. As a very junior Marine Corps 1st Lieutenant, my Battalion Commander selected me to command a Firing Battery where a friend of mine, with the same date of rank and career progression, became my Executive Officer. We were friends, but he felt strongly that he should have been the new Battery Commander Officer. The personal attributes that had been honed at the Naval Academy and the strategies I practiced while Brigade Commander provided the tools I needed to make the Battery a success and retain my XO's friendship.

Friend leadership doesn't start and stop with the military either—just ask the Rotary Club President, the Chairman of the Deacon Board, the coordinator for the American Heart Association event, or the captain of the high school football team. Friend leaders have a significant challenge, but also a significant opportunity. The key is to make sure that we understand what Fonzie meant when he said, “Just be coooool.” If we can crack that code, we will go a long way in helping our friend leaders have more *Happy Days*.

Note: For ease of reading and continuity, he, his, and him have been used throughout the article, but all concepts presented apply equally to men and women.