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### Chemistry is the key to a working partnership

Respect, humor, and passion for the job can build successful working partnerships

By Joyce Pellino Crane, Globe Correspondent, 10/12/03

They were friends before they were workplace partners. In fact, the relationship between WXKS-FM radio personalities Matt Siegel, host of the station's morning show, and Billy Costa, WXKS news director and entertainment reporter, has all the traits of a successful marriage. So much so that they joke about being each other's second wives.

Long-term partnerships like the 13-year pairing between Siegel and Costa happen in all industries and at all levels. Police, trapeze artists, and operating room surgeons and nurses are just a few examples of the jobs where the success of one depends on the success of the other.

Open communication, mutual respect, a sharing of passion, and a sprinkling of humor characterize the relationships of workplace partners, say specialists. "The chemistry between the two people is important," said consultant Rick Brenner of Boston-based Chaco Canyon Consulting.

Studies also show that having one close friend in an organization increases worker satisfaction, according to Monica Higgins, associate professor of organizational behavior at Harvard Business School.

And closeness is key to both the on-air and off-air relationship between the two broadcasters. Siegel and Costa ad-lib their daily shtick, which includes playful ribbing and personal revelations sandwiched with popular music, broadcast news, and celebrity interviews.

"It's not a scripted show," said Siegel. "I'm an ad-lib performer. I'm not a writer. But we're like two 10th-graders standing in the back of the class laughing."

Costa, whose personal life is on-air fodder for Siegel, said he wouldn't change a thing about the relationship on the show.

"Research shows that people like that we have an outside relationship," he said. "I think listeners like when we undress ourselves on the air. People would rather hear that things are awful. It makes their lives seem better."

While the relationship between Siegel and Costa is part of their value as a working team, not all such alliances are viewed benignly by management, according to Chaco Canyon's Brenner. "In a software development company, for example, alliances can be seen as threatening to the manager of the allied folks and maybe even to peers," he said.

Close pairing can also get in the way of advancement. A manager might worry that if he promotes one, the other will feel slighted and both will be unhappy about the split, said Brenner. However, he acknowledged that a relationship like Siegel's and Costa's is worth treasuring because so rarely do people in a workplace setting form lasting connections.

Siegel's and Costa's relationship has transcended births, deaths, a few divorces, and a couple of weddings for each of them. They socialize together with their families, travel together, and talk to each other by phone after the show several times a day.

"He's the best," said Siegel of Costa. "He's that old-fashioned kind of best friend. He's always been there."

Thomas Kochan, co-director of the MIT's Workplace Center, sees tremendous value in such partnering. "The benefit is you can bring different points of view and complementary talent to bear on a task that no individual can do on his own," said Kochan. "It takes work to seek out and form partnerships that have value. They don't happen automatically because we live in a society that values individualism and rewards individual contribution. So it takes a personality that flourishes through social interactive, networking, and dialogue."

Another successful working partnership is that of Christopher Myers and chef Michael Schlow. In 1999 they opened their first Boston restaurant, Radius, after being friends for 10 years.

"The partnership was based on friendship first," said Schlow.

While Schlow creates the menus and oversees food for their three restaurants, Myers is in charge of hospitality, managing employees, and making sure customers' needs are met. The two also own the Boston-based Via Matta and Great Bay restaurants.

"We share principals that make our business work," said Myers. Although the two communicate regularly and have weekly staff meetings with the managers of each restaurant, they say there are weeks when they're running in different directions.

"I won't see him for a week because he's doing charity events, working with his chefs, and I'll be doing human resources," said Myers. But their partnership is strong enough to transcend the busy days and nights.

There's something very precious about having that kind of intimacy in the workplace because it's not a very safe environment for people, said Hilda Perlitsh, associate professor at Boston University's Department of Psychology.

"People are always worried about the future. Are they going to have fairness, loyalty, job security, support, honesty, integrity? If you have someone that you can go to with some concern that you have, or some poor performance you've engaged in, or doubt you have in yourself, and know that you're not going to be damaged, that it's a precious



Globe Staff Photo/Pat Greenhouse  
**"He's that old-fashioned kind of best friend," says Matt Siegel (right) of partner Billy Costa. The relationship between the WXKS-FM radio personalities is part of their value as a working team.**



Globe Staff Photo/Essdras M Suarez  
**Phillips Academy football coach Leon Modeste (right) and Lou Bernieri, the team's defense coach, have known each other since the ninth grade.**

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resource in the workplace," said Perlitsh.

Perlitsh speaks about partnerships not only from her professional perspective but also as someone who once had such a workplace relationship. For 20 years she had a consulting practice with a sociologist - a man 20 years her senior with whom she was extremely close, she said. In 1991, the partner died, and she faced a period of grieving.

"You take stock of what you want to do," she said. "Do you want another partner? I chose not to."

Perlitsh ultimately put more time into teaching and developed a series of new relationships at Boston University, but ended her independent consulting practice. "I missed having a co-consultant," she said.

Another enduring workplace relationship is that of Phillips Academy football coach Leon Modeste and Lou Bernieri, a Phillips English instructor and director of the Andover Bread Loaf Writing Workshop. The two have known each other since the ninth grade when they attended the Polytechnic Preparatory Country Day School in Brooklyn, New York.

Bernieri came to Phillips Academy in 1977. He lured Modeste to join Phillips from a New York City coaching job in 1986. The two have been inseparable ever since. Bernieri serves as the football team's defense coach, traveling to games with and attending practice. The two men also assist with the Andover Junior Football League, consisting of elementary school-age children.

"One of us will say a joke and it goes back 30 years," said Bernieri. But as bonded as they are, they realize that the workplace partnership may not last forever.

"My wife is very worried about this," said Bernieri to Modeste. "She thinks if you weren't here, I would wither"

"I know if he weren't there, it would just be a job," said Modeste. "There'd be a lot less laughter and a lot less joy."

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