

Best friends, till one gets promoted

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THEY were his friends as well as his colleagues. Or so thought Gustavo Liu. Then he was promoted and they simply shunned him.

The banker's experience in a previous job is playing out at workplaces across Singapore.

A LinkedIn survey of more than 1,000 Singapore workers shows that 51.5 per cent of professionals here would consider sacrificing their friendship with a colleague if it meant a promotion.

Executives told My Paper that friendly colleagues were not really true friends.

"I have to differentiate between professional and personal friends," said Mr Liu, currently vice-president of United Overseas Bank (UOB).

In some ways, clashes among colleagues are inevitable in Singapore.

"Ambitious people with the ability to present certain appearances are selected for the same job," said Mr Liu. "Put these people together in the same office and there is bound to be competition."

Singapore workplaces are competitive and many professionals form relationships of convenience, said experts.

"As Singaporean professionals crave success, some compromise on relationships to achieve their personal goals," said Erman Tan, president of the Singapore Human Resources Institute.

National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser said: "Much depends on the degree of friendship...I believe people will consider the trade-offs and the costs and benefits of their actions."

Sometimes, things get nasty. When one banker was promoted, his colleague and supposed friend was so incensed that she demanded an inquiry. Eventually, she quit her job.

But office politics and backstabbing are also a part of working life.

Shirley Kok, director of Simply Buffet, said: "I'm very cautious with office friendships...as there is no immediate fallout (when disagreements or misunderstandings happen). They don't show their dissatisfaction upfront but they make things difficult for you, and backstab you when they have the chance.

"Now I tell myself that they're only colleagues and don't treat them like friends."

In this context, a boss' perspective was interesting. "I treat my colleagues as friends because it is easier to work together that way," said Meerly Wang, general manager of Lomography Singapore.

She agreed that some people did try to undermine their colleagues by complaining to the boss. But she said this wasn't wise as bosses could see through it.

"From a manager's perspective, it isn't wise to show your dissatisfaction with your colleagues by complaining to your boss," said Ms Wang.