

## Episode #159: Why You Need a Work BFF



**Full Episode Transcript**

**With Your Host  
Dr. Janel Anderson**

## *Episode 159: Why You Need a Work BFF*

Hello and welcome to another episode of the Working Conversations podcast where we talk all things leadership, business communication, and trends in organizational life. I'm your host, Dr. Janel Anderson.

Have you ever wondered what sets apart thriving teams from merely functional ones in the workplace turns out it's not just about productivity or skill sets. It's about something deeper, more personal. It's about having a work best friend.

Yes, that's right. Having a work best friend goes far beyond having someone to share an inside joke with or talk sports or share recipes with in addition to the personal payoff, it does an organization good when friendships flourish at work. Today we're diving into the power of friendships at work and why they are the secret sauce for building resilient high performing teams and thriving organizations.

Now, especially in an era of work from home and hybrid work, it can be harder than ever to make new friends at work and deepen those friendships. Not going to lunch together or going on a walk or doing happy hour or even catching an exercise class together after work. We're just not doing that nearly as much as we used to be doing pre pandemic.

Now some of that is because people are working from home or working hybrid schedule. And some of that is because we have just become far more disconnected. And it's having an impact and not a good one.

According to Gallup's most recent research on this, the importance of having a best friend at work is on the rise. In their article titled increasing importance of having a best friend at work, Gallup explores the significance of these workplace friendships in today's professional environment, citing data from their 2021 State of the American workforce report, Gallup reveals that employees who report having a best friend at work are more engaged, more satisfied with their jobs and less likely to experience burnout.

Now Gallup collects this data on a very regular basis. It's something that they track year over year. And while the importance of having a best friend at work is on the rise, the likelihood of it is on the decline. Gallup's been tracking this data again, as I mentioned for years and years, and the number keeps falling, it was hovering at about three in 10.

People reporting having a work best friend and my best friend we don't mean like bestie besties forever. We just mean a close friend at work a confidant, somebody that you know you can rely on and lean on. When the going gets tough. Whether that be the going in your personal life gets tough or the going at work gets tough, stressful, meeting

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tough deadlines, that sort of thing. So that number had been hovering at about three in 10.

People reporting having that best friend at work through pretty much throughout the pandemic but last year it dropped to only two in 10. Now this is problematic both for individuals and for the companies that they work for.

Having a BFF at work has tremendous benefits. And when we don't have our person at work that we can lean on and rely on, we lose out on some of those benefits. So let's look at what those benefits are. Both individually and for the organization.

We'll start off with the individual benefits because I always want to put the person first and the end the organization second, the person first. It gives people support and camaraderie. So as we all know sometimes work can be really stressful. We've got tight deadlines, challenging projects, demanding clients, micromanaging bosses and all the rest. So having a trusted ally right there in the trenches alongside us can provide invaluable emotional support and camaraderie.

Whether it's learning a sympathetic ear during a tough day or celebrating those victories when they do occur. Those work best friends offer that sense of solidarity that really fosters resilience and morale, and quite frankly, make sure we've come to work. It also provides great amounts of stress reduction so work related stress is a pervasive issue that can take a toll on both mental health and physical health, burnout as we know it.

However, having a close friend at work can serve as a buffer against that stress and a buffer against burnout. So research has shown that social support can mitigate the negative effects of stress by providing emotional validation, practical assistance, a sense of belonging and so much more. So, work besties offer a safe haven where you can decompress, share your concerns, and just really find someone to connect with and find solace amid a chaotic workday.

Another thing that work best friends do for individuals is they offer a great counterpoint to loneliness. Now if you've been listening to the podcast, you've heard me talk about loneliness before loneliness was on the rise prior to the pandemic. And then of course with a pandemic, where we all zeroed in and zoomed in and focused on our own family and friends and health and safety.

Our loneliness increased so it's increased globally, and having a close friend at work. Really can be a counterpoint to loneliness. And again, if you've heard me talk about loneliness before you know that it has mental health, negative effects, and it also has

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physical health negative effects.

We'll link up in the show notes the episode that I did on loneliness just a few episodes back so that if you haven't listened to that one you can go and hear more about loneliness and the impact that it's having on both our work lives and our personal lives. So having a close friend at work really is a strong counterpoint to that loneliness.

Now, those are just a few of the benefits to the individual. There's also tremendous benefits to the business when people are making friends and connecting at work. So in addition to those personal aspects that I mentioned, work, friends offer tremendous positive gain for the organization.

So let's look first at some of the usual suspects and then I'll share what I think are the even juicier or juicier ones. So first, increased employee engagement is huge and gallop research highlights a strong correlation between having a best friend at work and people's overall engagement levels. When employees feel connected to their colleagues on that personal level.

They are much more likely to be invested in their work and are motivated to contribute to the success of the team. This sense of belonging fuels enthusiasm and commitment, it leads to higher performance and higher productivity. It leads to higher attendance rates and lower presenteeism, presenteeism whereas when you just show up and dial it in without actually being engaged.

So increased engagement and of course, we would expect that. The second thing it does for the organization is it enhances and ramps up collaboration. So collaboration is essential of course in today's work environment, work best friends often have developed a deep understanding of each other's strengths and weaknesses and working styles, communication styles, and all of that leads to smoother collaboration and more effective teamwork.

Work besties can communicate openly they can offer each other constructive feedback without getting defensive. They can navigate conflicts easier. And all of that ultimately drives better outcomes for projects for initiatives for teams and for the organization as a whole. It also sets a great example for other teams that maybe aren't as high functioning.

Another benefit for the organization is retention of employees. So employees who have strong relationships with their colleagues, particularly a best friend at work, are far more likely to feel connected to the organization and they are far less inclined to seek

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opportunities elsewhere.

That's right, they're not going to be looking for other jobs nearly as much as employees who don't have that close friend at work. So this sense of loyalty can translate into higher retention rates.

And of course, that saves companies tons of money because on average, it costs about half of somebody's salary to replace them. So if you've got somebody who's making \$100,000 a year it's going to take about \$50,000 worth of lost time on the job, plus actual cost to rehire and train the person to fill that role. So, there is specifically some added benefits for organizations as it relates to the costs of turnover and recruitment.

Now additionally, when employees feel valued and supported by their peers, they are much more likely to advocate for their organization and contribute to a positive workplace culture. So that extends beyond the individual pair of people who are friends. It extends well into and deep into the organization's culture.

Now, those are the usual suspects, but here's the part that I find most fascinating. So gallops research found that there were some significant differences with companies where there were at least 60% of employees reporting that they had a best friend at work compared to organizations that were reporting less than a 60% rate of people having a best friend at work. So again, this is where I think it gets really juicy and really interesting.

The first measure that's markedly different is safety. So when you have that 60% or higher, that number of people in the organization reporting having a close friend, safety incidents and accidents decreased by 36%. More than a third fewer accidents and incidents when people report having a close friend at work.

Now, I think that this is because of a couple of things. I think we're more likely to look out for each other in those instances where safety is required. And we are also more likely to look out for ourselves because we're that much more engaged and invested in the relationship.

So let's just talk about this from a couple different angles. So the accidents and incidents that are being discussed here really have to do with physical accidents, say in a plant or a safety violation where somebody actually gets hurt, physically hurt.

So this could be making sure that you're wearing your steel toed boots and your reflective gear. If you are somebody who is working literally out in the field, say on a

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construction site. And the again the same is true for ourselves, not just our coworkers, we're looking out for our coworkers, but we're also looking out for ourselves more.

Now, the research doesn't necessarily extend into psychological safety, but I think it probably correlates or translates at least a reasonable amount into psychological safety and psychological safety. Is that sense that we can take a risk in organizational life without some negative repercussions, psychological safety also has to do with people outright bullying and other types of behavior that is that negatively impacts morale and people's again, psychological safety feeling they fit in and feeling comfortable at work.

So again, the psychological safety piece isn't as well researched as the physical safety pieces, but again, it's over 1/3 fewer accidents and incidents when an organization has 60% or more people reporting having a close friend at work. So I think that's fascinating.

Another piece that is again, a metric we can track is for those organizations that have 60% or more reporting, having a close friend at work, customer engagement increases by 7%. So we're more likely to have stronger engagements and connections with our customers.

Now, I think that extends from employee engagement. When we're more important when we're more engaged employee. We're much more likely to be engaged all around not just with our co workers, but with our customers as well. Whether those customers be internal or external. So customer engagement increases, profit profits also increase.

So again, amongst those companies who have 60% or more of their employees reporting having a close friend at work, profits increased by 12% That my friends is significant, absolutely significant.

Now, one other area that is impacted by having a close friend at work is inventory control. So inventory control means how much product or office supplies if you're not customer facing, say retail employee how much product is walking out the door unpaid for or walking out, the door is stolen. So inventory control gets tighter in those organizations, where they report having a close friend at work.

So again, if you're a retail organization that means less product going to be stolen by customers. Or perhaps festered internally. And then of course, if you're more of a white collar organization, or an information based economy, that means less productivity loss. So that inventory could could be time. I don't know that it was measured as time in these particular studies.



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But I could also see that relating it relating to time, and also things like office supplies and other types of white collar crime, nefarious behavior, if you will. So I think it's just fascinating that in those and just to recap that part of the research in those companies that reported 60% or more of their employees having a close friend at work, safety incidents and accidents go down by 36%.

Customer engagement increases goes up by 7%. profits go up by 7% and inventory control gets tighter. So I think that is just absolutely fascinating. So let's say that you're a leader in an organization and you want to put this into action. Despite the undeniable benefits of work best friendships. fostering these relationships may not always come naturally, especially in the remote and hybrid work. settings. So how can you create a church where friendships flourish?

Again, it's harder than ever for a whole host of reasons, including and far beyond work from home and hybrid work. Now, you know me, I've got ideas, I've got strategies that individuals and organizations can use to jumpstart stronger connections that may lead to friendships at work.

Now, I also want to really emphasize may may lead to friendships at work, we are not going to force the issue. There are some things that you can do that are going to foster the kind of environment where friendships flourish, but you are not going to get creepy on your coworkers. Try to be friends if they don't want to be friends with you. Okay, but as I mentioned, I've curated some ideas for you. Here are four of them.

First of all, from where ever on the organizational chart, use it, encourage social interaction. You have probably heard me say on this podcast before that we have because of all the things that we are doing in text based mediums like email, and instant messaging, and Slack channels and all of the rest we are leaning more towards message based communication and not interpret actual interpersonal communication that is, in real time, where we can hear each other's voice, see each other's facial expressions, and so on.

So we want to encourage more of that social interaction, because we are again, increasingly text driven versus being relationship driven. And that text is usually all about the tasks. So we want to lean a little bit away from task communication and only being task related, and being more relational in our communication and connecting with one another more.

So create opportunities to socialize and get to know one another beyond just your professional role. Now, this could be coffee breaks. So if you're an individual contributor,

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just invite somebody to go to coffee. This could be a virtual coffee, if you're both hybrid workers, or it could be an actual coffee if you're in the office together. This could also be team lunches and they could be team lunches that are organized and catered and paid for by the organization. Or these could be ad hoc lunches, where you're just inviting a single person to lunch or maybe encouraging the whole team to rally and go to lunch together or order lunch in together.

Also, make sure you're celebrating the milestones, high fives and attaboys at a girl's at events could be certain number of years of service. It could be your first six months with the organization, any type of thing where you can celebrate a win. It could be a win on a tough project or meeting a tight deadline. There's lots of different types of wins that could be celebrated. You could celebrate personal anniversaries. Like birthdays and so forth as well.

Also, any type of social event where you can bond with your co workers over shared interests, hobbies and the like that might be if you find out that other people like to go mountain biking and you like to go mountain biking. You're organizing a mountain biking event early on a Saturday morning.

So there's all kinds of ways that this can happen. And again, it can happen in a more organized fashion. If you're a leader, especially a leader with a budget, or if you're an individual contributor, this is something that can be very grassroots. So encouraging that social interaction.

Alright, number two, be curious and ask about things. So when you're on a zoom call or a team's call with somebody and you see flowers in the background, like I have flowers in the background, I always have these flowers in the background. If you've been on my YouTube channel watching the podcast episodes there. I love tulips. So if you saw those flowers in the background, you could ask me about, you know, what's your favorite flower? I see those tulips there all the time. Are those fresh tulips? Are those not fresh tulips? Tell me about the tulips. So ask about what you see in the background.

If you're together in the office, or other type of workplace and you see personal artifacts, pictures, could be pictures of children. It could be children's artwork, it could be real artwork on the wall hanging behind somebody or hanging or sitting in their cubicle space, whether that's pottery or artwork hanging on the wall. Ask about it. Take an interest in other people. The last time somebody took an interest in you I bet you loved it. I mean, provided the person wasn't creepy again. We're not going to get creepy with each other here. We're just taking an active, authentic interest in somebody else. So personal artifacts and so on.



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So being curious and taking an interest in others is your second idea. Idea number three some sort of a mentorship or buddy program. So let's talk about this a couple of different ways.

First of all, you could pair employees with mentors or buddies who can provide guidance, support and career advice and this could be in a formal way or it could be in an informal way.

These mentor type relationships often evolve into more meaningful friendships that transcend the actual mentorship relationship that they started with. And if you've been listening to the podcast for any length of time, you've undoubtedly heard me talk about the value that I've received personally, from both having a mentor in my career and being a mentor at different times in my career.

And again, those relationships can continue and they can flourish into friendships. And a more casual twist on this would be the buddy system. This could be part of an onboarding process where new hires are assigned a buddy that they regularly meet with or this could be something that you just instinct, instigate, where people are randomly assigned to a buddy and that buddy relationship could last a couple of weeks, a couple of months or even longer, before it changes and circulates to somebody else. Now with mentoring or buddying.

The key is in the frequency of the interactions. It's not just having a buddy on paper that you email with once in a while, it's actually meeting with the person. So Microsoft did a study where they had assigned buddies inside the organization and they found that when new hires because they were assigning new hires to a buddy who had with organization for a much longer period of time, what they found is that when the new hires met with their buddy more than eight times in the first 90 days on the job, 97% of them said that the buddy helped them become more productive more quickly.

Now, when new hires met with a buddy only once or twice during the first 90 days, that number was only 56%. So it's almost 100% of the ones who met with their buddy on about a weekly basis or a little bit less than weekly for those first 90 days. said that it was a huge help.

Again, if they didn't meet regularly they only about half of them said it helped. So that is your third idea mentorship programs or buddy programs. And then my fourth and final idea for you is team building and I want to talk about team building on both a micro level and a macro level.

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So on a micro level, what I mean by team building is icebreaker questions. It's always a national, something every single day. So you can look at the national day calendar online and find out what national holidays being celebrated. Whether it's National Donut Day or National Pizza Day or national adopt a cat day and then ask in in meetings, people to answer a question about what's their favorite pizza topping or whatever and you don't even have to go to what national day it is. You can just ask people what's their favorite pizza topping or what's the book or a movie that they enjoyed recently. So there's just lots and lots of different ways that you can do that on a very micro level where the teams are getting to know each other a little bit with a really quick question. It's not a big time commitment.

Now I also want you to really consider taking on larger scale team building activities. This is something that has fallen by the wayside as we by and large went remote and hybrid from the pandemic and even those organizations who have come back to the office haven't been investing as much time and money in those team building activities as they would benefit from if they did.

So, here's an example. Now, well, first of all, let me just say this. Sometimes, if you're trying to do something fun only, there might not be a budget for it. If you're just going to do like a ropes course or something that is traditionally a team building course.

You might not get funded by the powers that be in your organization. But if there is a budget, it's often easier to get those budget dollars to bring someone like me in to do some training or facilitation. on something that is business skills related. And the team building gets baked into that experience by design, not by accident.

So let me give you an example. I recently facilitated a two part program for a client. Now this particular team has 18 people on the team six of them are new within the last six months. So there's a third of the team is new within the last six months. And they work mostly remote.

They have the option of coming into the office but most of them don't. So we did a half day on site training that was followed by a catered lunch where they could continue to socialize and so forth and I was delivering some hardcore business skills that they absolutely needed to do their jobs. And I baked into that experience some opportunities for them to do pair shares and get to know each other in some large group activities and a variety of other things so that they're getting up out of their seats and getting to know each other just a little bit better or sometimes a lot better.

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Now, that program we designed it just in one of my favorite ways. So it is designed with a second half day program coming up six weeks later. And that is my favorite way to lock in the learning and allow that additional time to get to know each other because the very first thing I haven't met with him yet the second time, but the very first thing we'll do when we meet for the second time is report back out on those hardcore business skills that they learned the first time, where have they been using? Has it been going? What are their successes? Have there been any setbacks or any questions that I can answer or can we go deeper on some of the ideas that we talked about in that first session? And then of course, I've got some additional curriculum and some additional team building activities baked into that second session for them.

So that larger scale team building activities again, has largely fallen by the wayside and it's time to bring it back. And if you need reason business case, reason to bring it back it is because it is going to foster those close working relationships that become work friendships that become work best friendships.

And again, we've talked about some of the very specific and tangible benefits of that and the return on investment is tremendous because it cost me it cost them peanuts to have me come in compared to even if they had to, let's say rehire one of those people on that team. They, yeah, it was a bargain to have me come in if it saves one job. All right.

Now again, let me remind you that only in 10 people report having a close friend at work these days and that is not enough, both for the personal benefits and for the organizational benefits that having a close friend at work brings. We have got to get that number up. It is important to personal well being and it is important to organizational health.

Again, especially in an era of work from home and hybrid work. It can be harder than ever to make new friends at work and to deepen those friendships. But we have got to try for our own health and sanity and for the health of the organization. Now my throwdown challenge to you, my dear friend listener, is to make a friend at work. It doesn't have to start out as your work BFF in fact, that might be weird if that's what you were going for right out of the gate. Don't over try but definitely give it a try.

Remember, people like it when you're curious about them. People like it when you're interested in them. So find some common ground, find some common interests and see where it takes you.

And again, don't force it don't push it into attempting to be a work BFF just try to get to

