



## **Nepotism and Trust**

**by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP**

Nepotism comes from a Latin root "nepos" meaning nephew. In ancient times, it was used to describe a process in the Catholic Church whereby celibate clergy would elevate their nephews to higher position because they had no offspring of their own.

In modern organizations, the practice of nepotism is alive and well, and it can have devastating impacts on trust. It is interesting because in some cases we tolerate nepotism without question and in others we find the practice repugnant. Several societies still have a monarchy whereby a person is born into the line of succession. We accept this practice in numerous legitimate societies without difficulty. We also usually accept the practice of passing on a family-owned business to the offspring of the owner.

In business many people struggle with the appointment of a close relative or friend of the family if the person appears to be under qualified for the position. In most cases, the future of people working in an organization is at least loosely linked to the health of the entity, so when they see a poor match for the job get appointed as a leader simply because of a blood connection, it feels like a slap in the face at best.

The same helpless feeling occurs in the more common practice of cronyism, where an incumbent leader selects a favorite person based on qualifications other than how well the person is likely to perform. I doubt there are many people alive who have not experienced some form of angst upon realizing they are now reporting to a supervisor who is a poor leader but a close friend of the big boss.

The sad truth is that there is no effective cure for this problem. It can go on at any level in any organization, and it usually trashes trust. How can leaders do a better job of bringing along new talent if there is favoritism involved? First, you must realize it is a rare situation where there is absolutely zero favoritism. Few top leaders will promote based solely on the credentials of the individual without regard to the chemistry fit between individuals. Some form of advantage is at play in nearly every promotion.

I think it would be a refreshing change if a leader got up and said, "I am appointing Mark to the job of VP HR. You all recognize that Mark and I have worked together in the past and he is one of my favorite people." Being upfront about a slanted call is far better than just ignoring the bias and expecting people not to care. They do care, and the honest approach will at least show some integrity along with a modicum of sensitivity.

One thing to avoid is trying to run a sham whereby the leader indicates several candidates will be interviewed by the team but has already chosen who is going to get the position. That practice is debilitating and is easily detected. The leader who does this is going to suffer a huge loss in credibility and trust. If you have already made up your mind, do not run an interview process that looks like a fair one because you will be exposed more often than not.

There are exceptions where there is a legal precedent for interviewing several people even if the choice appears to be a foregone conclusion. It may be an appointment in a government agency or simply an internal company rule that each position must have competition before a selection is made. In these instances, keeping an open mind that a better candidate may surface is the appropriate antidote, because it is often the case.

When trying to appoint a blood relative, it is crucial that the person have at least the potential to do well. There have been numerous examples of a leader bringing in a son or daughter where it led to the demise of the organization. A classic example was when the brilliant and hands-on leader, Dr. An Wang, appointed his son Fred Wang to succeed him at Wang Laboratories in 1986. The company was losing its technological advantage, and Fred was unqualified to reverse the slide. By 1989, Dr. Wang fired his son, but it was too late to save the company.

Keeping the leadership in the family can work out well if there is adequate attention to the grooming of the individual and if the person has the requisite skill levels in terms of Emotional Intelligence and mental agility. One thing is for sure, the practice is not going to end any time soon, so get used to that empty feeling of helplessness when you get wind of a future appointment in your organization.

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of: *Trust in Transition: Navigating Organizational Change*, *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*, and *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind*. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations. For more information, or to bring Bob in to speak at your next event, **contact him at** [www.Leadergrow.com](http://www.Leadergrow.com), [bwhipple@leadergrow.com](mailto:bwhipple@leadergrow.com) or 585.392.7763

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