

## How Close Is Too Close?

by Margaret J. Marcuson

How close should you be to those you lead? Reader Linda Hart pointed me to an article in last month's *O* magazine by Suzy Welch, titled "When Good Women Make Bad Bosses." Welch suggests that women sometimes err on the side of being either the "Ice Queen," too distant from those they lead, or the "Good Mother," too close. But the issues Welch raises are relevant for both men and women, especially in ministry and other helping professions. Welch says, "The remedy lies in striking the right intimacy balance—close enough to know your people, distant enough to lead them."

Some leaders, of course, need to work on developing relationships with those they lead rather than hiding out or issuing orders. But I find that many of the leaders I work with want to create a kind, supportive workplace, and so they bend over backwards to accommodate those they lead. Sometimes we want to be so helpful, we lose sight of the organization's goals, and our own.

There is a time to be flexible and accommodating, to create a positive work environment, to support people through life challenges. But as leaders, it is our responsibility to keep the bigger picture in mind, to make sure that we are all moving forward together. Sometimes we need to challenge staff (including volunteers) to improve their performance, to keep on track with the goals, to take steps to deal with personal problems which are interfering with performance.

For men and women, when our natural style is to be helpful and caring, we can feel mean when we first challenge people. In a number of churches I've worked with, both clergy and lay leaders have found it hard to challenge staff. It may be useful to take some small steps, to practice setting some limits with staff members who are not functioning as they need to.

We don't serve people's best interests when we allow them to function poorly. We *do* serve them by helping them grow and become the best employee or volunteer they can be. It is also in *our* best interests, because that serves the organization best.

How close do we need to be? Here are some tips for finding the right distance: 1) Keep your goals in mind as you relate to staff. You are first and foremost their leader, not their friend. 2) Be able to say both "no" and "yes" to requests from staff. Be sure both options are in your repertoire, and consider #1 (your goals). 3) Spend time with key staff regularly. While friendship is not the goal, developing relationships is essential to your leadership. Remembering both goals and relationships will help us as we supervise individuals and lead the entire group.

<http://www.margaretmarcuson.com/>