



## **Leadership Barometer 181 Avoid Playing Favorites** **Robert T. Whipple, MBA CPTD**



As a leader, how do you avoid playing favorites at work? I ask this question in my consulting and teaching work frequently. Most times leaders think about this for several seconds. Then say with a shrug, “Well, I guess I do play favorites, but I try not to.”

Occasionally I will have some managers or supervisors who are adamant, “No, I do not play favorites.” As we discuss this a bit more, the managers realize that they do favor some people. They feel more compatible with them than others. In every group, there are people you would rather work with, if possible.

### **Avoiding playing favorites is more challenging when people are working remotely or hybrid**

As the logistics of who is working where, and when become much more complicated, the problem is more difficult. Since the frequency of face-to-face discussions is now lower, leaders need to be more sensitive about signals they send. People who do not know the details will make certain assumptions about a leader’s relationship with a coworker.

### **Playing favorites is human nature**

When making decisions about who does what in an organization, leaders habitually “play favorites.” They do it even though they know it is a real trustbuster. Let’s examine why this is and suggest a few antidotes that allow you to operate freely.

### **See the truth about playing favorites**

First, recognize that you do have people that you prefer to work with on specific jobs. You click with them and work well together. They may have a special skill and track record that gives you confidence the job will be done well. These are your “go-to” people for specific jobs.

When you use certain people in a special assignment, you appear to be paying favorites. That can create unfortunate conversations about you behind your back.

## **Techniques to reduce the problem of playing favorites**

Can you usually operate with your “go-to” people and still beat the stigma of playing favorites? There are several ideas to consider:

1. Have a kind of standard for special assignments. You select George to do the budget work because he has accounting training. That is something you can explain to others.
2. Discuss the situation openly with employees and offer flexibility. Give other people the opportunity to learn the skill. This method has three advantages. First, by openly addressing the issue of favorites, it becomes impossible for people to accuse you of being clueless. Second, you have shown a willingness to develop others in this special role, if they want to step up. Finally, no one is the heir apparent just because she has done you a few favors in the past.
3. The easiest way to beat the favorites stigma is to operate outside your “normal groove” on a few occasions. You only need to do this a time or two to beat the rap. The vast majority of times you can go with your gut or normal pattern. You get to choose which circumstance has some latitude. Also, be sure to include the remote workers in your analysis. Do not always favor the most accessible employee.
4. Cross-training everyone on a few jobs is another easy way to reduce the favorites issue. This is a simple matter of developing bench strength, which is a sign of an astute organization anyway.

## **How to be more objective**

There is an interesting backlash to the issue of having or playing favorites. If you are in a leadership position, you want all of your feedback and appraisal information to be objective. How do you know when you are being objective? The best way out is to have a solid correlation process among managers to review all performance appraisals. Be on the lookout for any local bias.

It is amazing how people cannot see their own biases toward certain individuals. In order to have an environment of trust, people need to know they will be treated fairly.

## **Conclusion**

Be constantly aware of the issue of playing favorites. It is a significant trust buster in every organization. By using the techniques outlined above, any leader can avoid the trap. At the same time, you can use your “go-to” people most of the time for critical assignments.

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