

# Q<sup>12</sup>® ELEMENT: Q10

## I have a best friend at work.

Gallup's research indicates that workplaces in which employees report having a "best friend" are more efficient than workplaces with fewer best friends. People would rather build bridges than walls around themselves. This element deals with optimizing group contributions by enhancing the quality of relationships between employees in the workplace, in turn nurturing trust and emotional loyalty.

Gallup itself would have dropped the statement if not for one stubborn fact: It predicts performance. Something about a deep sense of affiliation with the people in an employee's team drives him to do positive things for the business he otherwise would not do. Early research that identified the 12 Elements revealed a very different social bond among employees in top performing teams. Subsequent large-scale, multi-company analyses confirmed the Tenth Element is a scientifically salient ingredient in obtaining a number of business-relevant outcomes, including profitability, safety, inventory control, and — most notably — the emotional connection and loyalty of customers to the organization serving them.

Prior to seeing the group's Tenth Element results, a personnel representative from a consumer product company said, "Our policy is to not have close relationships at work. Our executives frown on it." The results showed policy was being flouted with abandon, with close friendships being more prevalent in the business than in the average organization. In the battle between company policy and human nature, human nature always wins. The evidence suggests people will fulfill their social needs, regardless of what is legislated. Companies do far better to harness the power of this kind of social capital than to fight against it. Business units in the top quartile on this element achieve profitability a full percentage point or two higher than that of bottom-quartile, unfriendly environments.

Numerous qualitative studies of employee engagement suggest customers not only sense the level of camaraderie where they shop, but also that it makes a large difference in their experience, if for no reason other than its natural contagiousness. In the service industries, the customer ratings of workgroups with strong Tenth Element levels are 5 to 10 percent higher than those of impersonal or acrimonious

groups, explaining the difference between success and failure in many organizations.

Other connections between the "best friend" statement and business outcomes are less intuitive, at least at first blush. At one electric utility, friendships among team members proved to be responsible for lower accident rates. When the workers were asked for the reason, they said the answer is simple: People look out for their friends. A friend reminds his buddy to put on his hard hat. In the few seconds before a fall might occur, a friend is more likely to spot the hazard and rush to steady the ladder. A friend guards his comrade's safety as much as he does his own, and shudders at the thought of having to ride to his coworker's house to inform his family, whom he probably knows well, that there has been an accident at work. It isn't as though team members want to see accidents occur to those who are not their friends. Rather, where there is not a close bond, it is less likely there will be the level of vigilance that can make the difference between a close call and a mishap. A team that has two-thirds of its members strongly agreeing they have a best friend at work averages 20 percent fewer accidents than a team with only one in three strong on the Tenth Element.

Research on workers in various settings has shown that friends are more likely to invite and share candid information, suggestions, and opinions, and to accept them without feeling threatened. Friends tolerate disagreements better than do those who are not friends. The good feelings friends share make them more likely to cheer each other on. Friends are more committed to the goals of the group and work harder, regardless of the type of task. Group members who identify most closely with the team are more likely to monitor its performance against the goal.

This summary is a revised excerpt on this Q<sup>12</sup> element from *12: The Elements of Great Managing*.