Leading Your Former Peers: Navigating the Awkward First Weeks

Leadership - 1 December 2025 - By Dr. Amitabh Kumar

A common but rarely discussed transition

Being promoted into a leadership role over people who used to be your peers, sometimes your closest work friends, is one of the more emotionally complicated leadership transitions, and one organisations rarely prepare people for. The relationships do not automatically settle into a new equilibrium on their own; without deliberate attention, they often stay stuck in an uncomfortable in-between for far longer than necessary.

Why it is harder than it looks

Former peers may test whether the relationship has really changed, sometimes by pushing boundaries that used to be normal, informal jokes at your expense, expecting the same level of casual disclosure they had before. You, meanwhile, may feel genuine guilt about now needing to evaluate, direct, or occasionally say no to people you consider friends. Both sides are often waiting for the other to name what has changed, and neither wants to be the one to raise it first.

What tends to help

Name the change directly, early. A brief, honest conversation, individually, with each former peer, acknowledging that the relationship now includes a new dimension, and asking how they would like to navigate it, tends to relieve tension far more than letting it go unspoken.

Be consistent, not uniformly friendly. Favouring former close friends, even unconsciously, in assignments or feedback, is quickly noticed by the wider team and erodes trust fast. Fairness has to be visibly consistent, even when it costs a friendship some of its old ease.

Accept some loss of informality as a real cost. Certain kinds of openness, venting about the organisation, sharing frustration about your own manager, are no longer appropriate to share downward once you are the leader. This is a genuine loss worth acknowledging privately, even while finding other relationships, peers in similar roles, a mentor, a coach, where that openness can still exist.

Give it real time. Most former-peer relationships do settle into a new, workable form, but it typically takes months, not weeks, and it rarely happens without at least one direct, sometimes uncomfortable conversation along the way.

Why this is worth doing well

How a new leader handles this specific transition is closely watched, not only by the former peers directly involved, but by the wider team, as an early signal of how fairly and honestly this person will lead. Handled with care, it becomes one of the clearest early demonstrations of the leader's integrity.