Professional and Unprofessional Relationships

Cognitive Lesson Objective:
• Comprehend that the negative impact of unprofessional relationships (UPRs) requires officers to inherently accept the responsibility for promoting and maintaining professional relationships.

Cognitive Samples of Behavior:
• Define UPRs and fraternization.
• State the Air Force policy on professional relationships, UPRs and fraternization.
• List the elements of fraternization.
• Explain the effects of UPRs on the unit.

Affective Lesson Objective:
• Value the negative impact of UPRs.

Affective Sample of Behavior:
• Conform to Air Force policy on professional and unprofessional relationships and fraternization.
One of the most troublesome problems confronting the Air Force is the issue of unprofessional relationships. The readings in this lesson will provide you with a better understanding of unprofessional relationships. You'll learn exactly what the Air Force policy is regarding this subject, how UPRs affect mission accomplishment, and how to avoid unprofessional relationships. During this lesson, you will be provided information regarding the legalities of UPR, including fraternization. In order to ensure you understand UPRs, we'll discuss what a professional relationship looks like.

Air Force Instruction 36-2909, *Professional and Unprofessional Relationships*, dated 1 May 99, clearly states the policy on this subject. So you may know first hand what the Air Force policy is, we’ve printed it here for you.

**Air Force Policy on Professional Relationships**

Professional relationships are those that contribute to the effective operation of the Air Force. The Air Force encourages personnel to communicate freely with their superiors regarding their careers, performance, duties, and missions. This type of communication enhances morale and discipline and improves the operational environment, while preserving proper respect for authority and appropriate mission focus. Participation by members of all grades in organizational activities, unit-sponsored events, intramural sports, chapel activities, community welfare projects, youth programs, and the like enhances morale and contributes to unit cohesion.

Relationships are unprofessional, whether pursued on or off-duty, when they detract from the authority of superiors or result in, or reasonably create the appearance of, favoritism, misuse of office or position, or the abandonment of organizational goals for personal interests. Unprofessional relationships can exist between officers, between enlisted members, between military personnel and members of the civilian employee work force and between officers and enlisted members. This final form of unprofessional relations is fraternization, an aggravated form of unprofessional relationship, and is recognized as a violation of Articles 92 or 134 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ).

Fraternization is a personal relationship between an officer and an enlisted member which violates the customary bounds of acceptable behavior in the Air Force and prejudices good order and discipline, discredits the armed services, or operates to the personal disgrace or dishonor of the officer involved. The custom recognizes that officers will not form personal relationships with enlisted members on terms of military equality, whether on or off-duty. Although the custom originated in an all male military, it is gender neutral. Fraternization can occur between males, between females, and between males and females. Because of the potential damage fraternization can do to good order, discipline, morale, and unit cohesion, the President specifically provided for the offense of fraternization under the UCMJ. Consequently, disciplinary action can be initiated under the UCMJ against an officer for fraternization. (See Manual for Courts-Martial, 2012, Part IV, Paragraph 83 for a complete discussion of fraternization, and Paragraph 59 for the related offense of conduct unbecoming an officer.)
For UCMJ action to occur, the five elements of fraternization must be proven. The five elements of fraternization (MCM, Sec IV, Art 134, Para 83) are the following:

- The accused must be an officer or warrant officer.
- There must be an officer and enlisted involved (military equality).
- The accused must have known the member is enlisted.
- Must be specifically prohibited by the military service.
- Must be service discrediting.

Discussion of Policy

Proper professional relationships are an essential element for building morale in any unit. Air Force policy on professional relationships is based on customs of the armed forces; these customs were derived from the need to maintain discipline. There are two important aspects of this policy you must be familiar with: fraternization and superior-subordinate relationships.

A close review of AFI 36-2909 and the Manual for Courts-Martial (MCM), United States, 2012, reveals fraternization can only occur between an officer and an enlisted person. Fraternization, as a punishable offense, cannot occur between two officers or between two enlisted members. This type of relationship falls into the broad category of unprofessional relationships. Unprofessional relationships can also be punished under the UCMJ under Article 92, since that article allows prosecution for breaking known regulations.

The Air Force has a long-standing and well-recognized custom that officers shall not fraternize with enlisted members (associate with them under circumstances that prejudice discipline of the US armed forces). If an officer knowingly fraternizes with one or more enlisted members, and it prejudices discipline or discredits the armed forces, it’s a punishable offense.

Remember, the need to make a distinction between officers and enlisted members isn’t based on a difference in class or culture, but on discipline. It’s difficult for an officer to supervise an enlisted member who’s a close friend or with whom there’s a private relationship. Such a situation promotes favoritism, which can compromise the respect others have for an officer’s professionalism, integrity, and obligations.

As an officer, it’s your responsibility to recognize the negative impact of fraternization, avoid it personally, and ensure your subordinates don’t fraternize. Allowing unprofessional relationships in your unit may cause morale problems, a reduction in productivity, and ultimately could cause mission failure.
Proper superior-subordinate relationships are equally important for creating a productive work environment. Officers must ensure their personal relationships with subordinates, especially those they supervise, don’t give the appearance of favoritism or impropriety. Basically, members of different ranks are expected to maintain a professional relationship, governed by time essential elements of dignity and military courtesy.

You’re expected to exhibit appropriate behavior both on and off-duty. Personal relationships between Air Force members become matters of official concern when they adversely affect duty performance, morale, and discipline.

AFI 36-2909 doesn’t prohibit officer and enlisted personnel from socializing at formal or informal functions. Obviously, activities which contribute to unit cohesiveness are essential and encouraged. However, a proper balance must be maintained if a unit is to operate effectively. As an officer, you’re responsible for recognizing the difference between appropriate and inappropriate relationships and adhering to Air Force policies. The Air Force policy is clear! Fraternization is not allowed and is punishable under the UCMJ. Other relationships that may not fit the requirements of fraternization but are unprofessional are also prohibited because of the potential to affect duty performance, morale, discipline and ultimately the accomplishment of the mission.

**MILITARY RELATIONSHIPS BREED CAUTION**

*By Colonel Dennis Kansala*

If your boss was your buddy, how would your environment be affected?

Maybe you could get ahead of the pack a little faster, do the job your own way, and stay off the bad details. Maybe you could even get a super enlisted evaluation report or an officer effectiveness evaluation. This would be great for you, as long as you’re the boss’ buddy.

But what if you’re not part of the “in crowd” and someone else is, or at least appears to be? How would you feel then? Do you respect and have confidence in a boss whose actions reflect a tight personal relationship with a select person or group you work with? If given an order that involved substantial risk or sacrifice, would you have any lingering doubts about this boss’ motives?

What I’m driving at is called professional relations—a subject that applies to all of us—from Airman basic to general. You don’t have to be a colonel or chief master sergeant to understand the need for proper relationships between superiors and subordinates.

Don’t like the terms superior and subordinate? Don’t confuse being equal under the law as an American with being equal in command or authority in a military unit.
You’ll never get away from the need for proper professional relations. Superiors are located at the top as well as at the action level, and so are subordinates. You don’t have to be in the Air Force long before it’s part of your duty to direct the actions of others. Yet, at the end of a 30-year career, there will still be superiors giving you orders.

The Air Force policy on professional relations is simple: Members of different grades are expected to maintain a professional relationship governed by mutual respect, dignity, and military courtesy.

We can all understand this—treat others the same as you want to be treated. The term “different grades” doesn’t just cover officer-enlisted relationships, but also senior-junior officer and senior-junior enlisted interaction.

It’s the need for discipline in the Air Force that requires proper professional relations. We’re not business people answering to a group of stockholders. Our mission requires more. There’s nothing wrong with good management, but it’s not enough. In combat, there isn’t time to worry about compliance, loyalty, or the leader’s motives.

To execute orders effectively, the superior’s integrity must be accepted without question. This won’t happen if there’s undue familiarity between superiors and subordinates. The key words are “undue familiarity...” What does this mean? It doesn’t mean you can’t socialize with your boss or, if you’re the leader, with those who are in your charge. In fact, activities and functions that contribute to unit cohesiveness, effectiveness, and esprit de corps are encouraged and are part of our tradition. However, those activities and personal relationships that undermine the mission and operational effectiveness of the Air Force must be avoided.

These are situations where a superior, through a boss-buddy relationship, loses the respect of subordinates, or even worse, undermines the authority of others’ leadership positions. That’s right. When an officer steps out of his leadership position and becomes one of the guys, what does that do for the next officer who’s trying to maintain standards? Will the response from subordinates to his orders be a “yes, sir” or just a lot of mumbling, or worse?

Also consider the noncommissioned officer who needs to get a job done, but nobody hears him because his predecessor found it easier and more fun to be part of the crowd rather than be the leader. If you suspect that senior officers and NCOs have set up an elite class based on a bigger paycheck or some social superiority, you’ve missed the point. This is not a philosophical question of someone being better. It’s a matter of military authority—who’s in charge. In a crunch, there can be no question who’s giving the orders and if they’ll be obeyed.

Remember, even the appearance of a buddy-boss situation can create morale and discipline problems. It may not be fun to draw the line between friendship and supervisory responsibilities, so avoid popularity contests in the first place. Set up activities that contribute to your unit’s effectiveness, but, as a leader, avoid the undue familiarity trap.
Bibliography: