

651 Letters & Friendship-Points

As I write this bulletin, France has recalled its ambassadors to the U.S. and Australia, furious that it was excluded from a US-UK-Australia nuclear-powered submarine pact. Despite the fact that diplomatic relations between countries are based largely on national interests and hence there are no permanent enemies nor friends, France's move still raises an eyebrow as the French and the Americans have been allies for a very long time and it is no small thing that the French Foreign Minister claimed, "There has been a lie, there has been duplicity, there has been a major breach of trust, there has been contempt, so it's not OK between us, it's not OK at all. That means that there is a crisis". A question came to mind: 'How are we making alliances and friends in terms of how we advance our careers and businesses?' Who are our allies who help us advance our interests together?

The relationship between Vincent van Gogh and his brother Theo is well known. In both a financial and emotional sense, Theo was Vincent's biggest supporter. Vincent actually wrote 651 letters to his brother Theo. According to the letters, it is clear that Theo was confident in Vincent's talent, and that the latter regularly wrote about the commercial potential of his work. Vincent pinned his hope on Theo to market his artwork.

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But what Vincent did not know was that his use of raw colors and bold imagery concerned Theo, who was committed to the Impressionists and did not fully appreciate the new style. Even though Theo worked in an art gallery and was well connected in the art world, he did not exhibit Vincent's work in spite of his belief in his brother's talent. Even though he financed Vincent, Theo buried the brilliant artist's work from the art world. I find this tragic, especially considering their close relationship; "I don't really have any friends except for you, and when I'm ill you are always in my thoughts", wrote Vincent to Theo in one of his letters. Vincent's trust was misplaced, as it appears. Perhaps the French feel this way about the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia right now.

My ideal client is one who becomes my friend. In this regard, I am a lot more fortunate than Vincent van Gogh. I am committed to advancing my friends' and clients' interests and enjoy such reciprocal relationships. Recent events have amazed me, such as when one of my Business School clients asked for my materials on Family Business Advisory & Coaching because she wanted to show them to her contacts working in Family Offices- it made my day!

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Maybe we could take inspiration from the diplomatic saga of France and her (now not-so) friends and look at:

- Are there powerful allies with whom we advance together in our careers?
- Do we actively promote the interests of our allies?
- Have some relationships become fruitless? Should they be pruned or cut back on?

I almost worked for an acquaintance who was about 15 years older than me and was then the Asia Pacific Managing Director of a European Management Consulting firm in the early 2000s. During the interview, he explained how he managed his relationships, using a point-and-bucket system.

He said, 'like friends who turn up only to ask for donations, ask for my ideas and use them in their business without giving me any credit, those who gossip behind me, and those who promise business but don't deliver, all will count as 1-point deductions, 2-point deductions, 5-point deductions and 10-point deductions. All misconduct is categorized into three buckets based on severity; those who exceed 50 points are blacklisted.

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When I work with clients, I like them to become my friends, as well as my friends to become my clients, because (working) relationships like this are like a beautiful synchronized dance. When I first learned of my acquaintance's 'friendship system,' I found it strange, but I wonder whether there is an optimal balance between his bizarre way of accounting for his friends' ills and Vincent van Gogh's absolute faith in his brother.

Your thoughts? Let's chat!

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