

Office Romances are Risky Business

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Whether you work in a formal setting such as a law or accounting firm or you are wine and dining starlets in the less informal setting of an entertainment or high tech firm, getting romantically involved with someone in the workplace is always risky business. Despite clear directives from human resource managers and employee manuals which generally discourage amorous relationships in the workplace, such relationships are on the rise. A survey sponsored by Glamour magazine and lawyers.com confirm that forty-one percent of all employees ages 25 to 40 have admitted to having engaged in an office romance.

With more women in the workplace, longer hours and more relaxed standards about relationships, researchers predict that over 70 percent of single employees will become romantically involved with someone and a large number of married people will have extra-marital affairs with a co-worker. For some, the workplace has become the new "singles bar" and competes with on-line dating services as the 21st century method of finding romance.

Despite their popularity, romantic interludes can wreak havoc on your career. When you consider the legal implications, possible public humiliation, emotional distress and career complications, think twice before you allow yourself to be struck by Cupid's arrow.

Although not usually grounds for termination, affairs between co-workers can form the basis for expensive sexual harassment lawsuits. Even in the context of a consensual affair between an employee and a supervisor, an employer might be sued by other employees if the supervisor demonstrates favoritism. Also, under certain state laws, supervisors can be held strictly liable for claims of sexual harassment from their subordinates. And in some states, the supervisor may be held personally liable for proven claims of sexual harassment.

Some companies require male and female supervisors involved with their subordinates to sign "love contracts." These documents require the subordinates to acknowledge that the relationship is completely consensual to prevent the subordinate from later claiming that he or she was coerced or pressured into the relationship by the superior. Human resource managers recognized that such contracts may not be sufficient to prevent subsequent costly lawsuits and hence, many companies have strict policies prohibiting supervisors from dating subordinates. Many employees believe such policies violate their rights of privacy and their freedom of association.

Employees also risk public humiliation as a result of office affairs. Bill Clinton's extramarital affairs while governor of Arkansas became public knowledge as he made his first run for presidency. Likewise, several high profile criminal cases have involved the testimony of women involved in workplace romances with defendants facing prosecution. What starts off

as a private relationship between two adults may become the subject of not only a grand jury investigation, but also a national news show or publication.

Ending or accepting the end of an office relationship can be traumatizing. Having to work closely with, take direction from or share an office with someone with whom you have been involved in a relationship with can be extremely challenging. Given that most office affairs are clandestine, not only must one manage their emotions, they must do so while concealing the existence of the relationship. Unlike a breakup with a significant other outside the workplace, maintaining one's composure and not allowing the breakup to disrupt the workplace can create additional stress states Los Angeles psychologist Dr. William Marshall. According to Dr. Marshall, "it is unlikely that an employee who has broken up with a co-worker is going to be able to work along side that individual and achieve the goals of the company."

Employees need to consider relocation, reassignments and changes in the hierarchal structure of a company which may impact an existing office relationship. Dating someone that you supervise or who supervises you is particularly problematic. Co-workers will never accept or believe that promotions, assignments, pay raises, etc. are based on merit. All decisions will be tainted and it will be nearly impossible to be respected for your talents and skills. No spin or public relations campaign will prevent everyone in the company from thinking that your promotion is based on sexual favors rather than your dedication and demonstrated work product. This can cause jealous co-workers to purposely try to undermine your success, which in turn can affect the productivity of your office. And if the affair is revealed, typically the subordinate and in most cases the woman, is going to be penalized.

Given the potential for disaster, lawsuits and psychological scars, office romances just are not worth the risk. However, anyone in such a relationship or contemplating one, should do so discretely and strategically. Like every decision, career focused women must make, the decision to become involved romantically at work should be done with the end in mind. If you haven't thought about all of the possibilities, including possible termination, public humiliation and the possible negative impact on your long term career goals, don't do it.

If you have weighed the consequences and are prepared to maturely accept the responsibilities of such a relationship consider the following. Avoid engaging in any unprofessional conduct while at work or while attending work related functions or meetings. This means that all physical contact is off limits. Also, forget about sending emails, interoffice messages, voice messages or any type of written or oral communication which you wouldn't want to see on the front page of the New York Times. Let the fiasco involving the former senior executive at Boeing be your guide.

Make a rule to never date anyone in your chain of command or who is or is likely to ever supervise you. It's just too messy. Make sure you have read your company's policy regarding office romances and that nothing you do is a violation of those policies. Otherwise you may be putting your job and career in immediate jeopardy. Don't allow your relationship to

disrupt the workplace or impact the efficiency of your team. In today's profit driven companies, there is little tolerance for anything that threatens the productivity of the workplace.

And most importantly, have a serious plan B in the event that despite your efforts at managing the relationship in a professional manner, it becomes the subject of office gossip, and you become a casualty.

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