

How to Handle Office Romances

Sarah Fullbrook | Image: Jeremy Bruneel | Published: March 07, 2011



Experts weigh in on handling office romances and avoiding the mistake that forces legit relationships into covert office affairs.

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With workers spending more time in the office and less time at home, it is no wonder that Cupid's arrow often strikes between cubicles. To help employers and employees alike navigate this minefield of office romance protocol, we sought the advice of three experts: Linda Edgecombe, author and professional speaker; Cissy Pau, principal consultant at Clear HR Consulting; and Claire Sutton, a registered clinical counsellor.

Be realistic

All agree that outlawing employee relationships does not tend to work. "You can try to say zero tolerance," says Pau, "but what

Zero tolerance for office romances isn't your best bet, but alternative methods

would you do if a relationship does occur?" Edgecombe agrees, pointing out that zero-tolerance policies won't abolish office romances; they'll just push them "under the radar." A better strategy is to focus on policies that encourage professionalism while at the same time refreshing everyone on your office's sexual harassment policies.

Be clear

Establishing a clear and concise policy about workplace dating is crucial. If it is an absolute no-no for a manager to engage in a romantic relationship with an employee under their supervision, it must be made clear to everyone. Likewise, if an employer becomes aware of a relationship between two employees, it is important to sit them down and set forth your expectations. It is imperative to "set the expectation of boundaries," insists Pau, especially on high-profile or sensitive assignments.

Think ahead

Before getting involved with a colleague, it is important to think about the possible repercussions a relationship may have on you and your career. You should always "be aware of what you're getting into," says Sutton and should consider both the best- and worst-case scenarios. Would you be willing to switch departments or even companies if the relationship gets serious? Alternatively, if the relationship were to end, could you handle seeing an ex every day at work?

Full disclosure

Edgecombe insists that secret office romances rarely remain secret, so if you think it's warranted, it's best to inform your manager or employer yourself rather than have them hear it through the office grapevine. However, not every office romance has to be announced. Pau suggests that when there is no apparent conflict of interest and no established policy regarding office relationships, it is sometimes best to remain quiet about your personal life. The deciding factor, she says, should be conflict of interest. If there doesn't appear to be one, there is probably no need to go public.

Be professional

It is extremely important to keep the divide between personal life and work life intact. You have to remain professional and respectful, says Sutton. As difficult as it might be, you must do your best to leave your personal life at the door when coming to work. Bringing personal fights or arguments to work can be particularly troublesome, says Pau. It's especially important to leave your personal battles at home during a breakup, which can be stressful for everyone involved, even among the most professional of employees.

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