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An Office Romance?

It is reported that in our lifetime we will spend 100,000 hours at work. Some suggest that even this number may be underestimated. If one is spending half (or more) of his or her waking hours at work it should come as no surprise that some intimate relationships are going to develop. Along with long hours together there is the development of mutual respect, strong communication, and the genuine friendship that derives from meeting common challenges, achieving common goals and commiserating when things go badly. Add human nature to this powerful mix and it's clear why between 36% and 58% of employees say they have been involved in an office romance. Perhaps one becomes more candid with age because I saw one study indicating that 72% of employees over the age of 50 reported at least one workplace romance over the course of their career. And just to complicate the picture a bit more I noted one study that indicated about 25% of adults owned up to an extramarital affair at work.

In these situations there are more interests at play than just those of the two principals. The employer has some important issues to consider when it comes to workplace relationships. Intimate relationships at work are a distraction, are never secret for long, inspire gossip which can impact morale and productivity, give rise to jealousy, claims of favoritism, preferential treatment, sexual harassment and creating a hostile workplace. These are a few of the reasons why many employers try to prohibit them completely - to little or no effect. So what can a savvy but realistic leader do to minimize the risks these inevitable situations can lead to. I advise my management clients to do the following:

- Do have a firm ban on relationships between bosses and subordinates.
- Don't have a blanket ban which will fail and turns good, loyal employees into rule-breakers.
- Do require notifying HR of intracompany relationships. I've seen some very legalistic companies have the parties sign a memo verifying that the relationship is consensual and complies with company anti-harassment policies. Cover this topic in all supervisory and management training programs.
- Don't require going public after a first date but when it becomes clear it will be an ongoing relationship. Remember there are very few secrets that can be kept for very long so sooner is better than later.
- Do fire any HR person caught gossiping.
- Don't allow public displays of affection.
- Do have a "one shot" policy. This means an employee gets one chance to ask a fellow-employee out - so spiff up, time your request wisely, smile, and give it your best shot. Note: Only "yes" means yes. "No" means *no*. And for the dense-minded, no answer or "maybe" or "when Hell freezes over" means **no**.
- Don't allow your organization to get lax about claims of sexual harassment just because sometimes meaningful relationships and even love can be found at work. More than ever it has been shown that genuine sexual predators do exist in the workplace. This is not even in the same universe as romance or love. This is crime of the highest order.

So this is what your employer is thinking. But what about if you are sitting across the hall or on the other side of a cubicle wall from somebody who actually makes your little heart go "thumpity-thump"? If you've read the above you probably think I'm an old Scrooge. But I'm not. I believe in romance but where, how, when, and with as few shots fired as possible. If you are considering tip-toeing into this minefield of amour here is what I advise.

Paths Forward

• Know the rules.

Before doing *anything* (either wonderful & gutsy or reckless & ill-advised) find out what your employer's rules, policies, and procedures are about dating fellow employees. Know where you stand and what you and your prospective paramour have at risk.

• Prepare for the Worst.

Romantic relationships have only two possible outcomes. One is that the couple will get together and live happily ever after. The other is that, at some point, they will break up. Has anyone ever broken up with you? Have you ever broken up with someone? How would you like to then see them frequently or maybe every day at work? One of you may have a broken heart, or be blindsided, or may feel betrayed, or be totally uncaring, unfeeling, or hate your guts. It happens. I feel I must share one last suggestion here but consider how rarely pre-nuptial agreements are actually discussed in the blissful early days of a relationship. If you've discussed the possibility of a workplace romantic breakup try to get agreement on how you'd handle it. Hopefully that would be as mature, civil adults and with a minimum of drama. But, ultimately, it may cause one or maybe both of you changing jobs and both of you might take a ding to your professional reputations.

- **Hope for the Best.**

If you break the rules you or both of you may be transferred, might be disciplined or maybe even lose your job(s). And good jobs (ones that pay well and that you enjoy) are not easy to find. But if you think he might be *Mr. Right* or she might be *The One* who am I to say the risks are not worth finding what the whole world is searching for. It is reported that 40% of office romances become serious, long-term relationships. And 22% of U.S. married couples first met at work. But if you're thinking he or she might just be *Mr. or Ms. Good Enough For Right Now* then some adult risk assessment is advised.

- **Intentions and Results Seem to Matter.**

A CEO of McDonalds was terminated for having a consensual relationship with an unnamed employee. At the time he was a divorced, single person but since everybody below the CEO is technically a subordinate he was fired. He remains single. A Microsoft founder started dating a woman who worked for him when he was a bachelor. They are now married and quite happily by all appearances. I'm not sure what these two instances tell us except that a) it happens, b) it happens in executive suites as well as the loading dock, c) some get fired and some win the love lottery and d) who you are and how your intentions are assessed may count for or against you. As noted above it is a minefield.

- **An Unfair Caveat.**

I've been fortunate to consult primarily with employers that strive to treat all employees with the protections provided by the law and with the respect due any human being. On rare occasion (very rare, thankfully) I've happened into an organization that does the bare legal minimum and leaves "all that soft, mushy shrinky stuff" to a single, usually overworked HR person. The U.S. Supreme Court has legalized many LGBTQ rights but, sadly, discrimination (such as in employment and housing) is still legal in many states. Some employers ignore or skirt the law and some other countries are downright barbaric. LGBTQ employees must review all of what I have written here with an unclouded view of the organizational, ethnic, and country culture of their employer or prospective employer. Even in states where LGBTQ rights *are* protected and workplaces *are* more diverse I have come to understand that officially diverse doesn't necessarily mean genuinely *inclusive*. Am I colluding with backward elements of some cultures and advising good people to remain in the closet? God, I hope not. But ethically I cannot advise anyone to commit career suicide or suffer ostracism, harassment or even physical threats from going public about a private romantic matter. May understanding and, yes, love move us all further down the road toward a vision of our common humanity.

Suggested Resource:

The Office Romance: Playing With Fire Without Getting Burned by [Dennis M. Powers](#)
(Author)

LifeMap (sm) is about attending to the delicate balance between the longing for love and the struggle for the legal tender. (Thanks, Jackson.)

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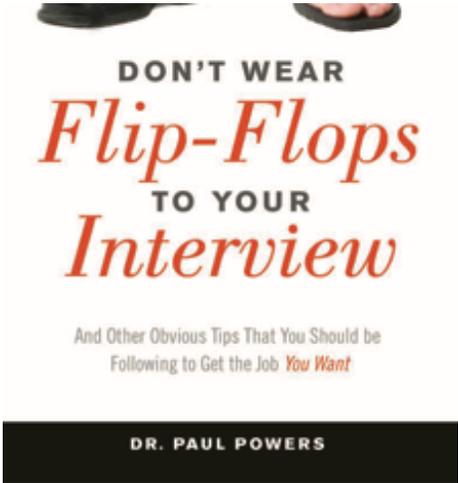
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Dr. Paul

Dr. Paul Powers | www.drpaulpowers.com



Dr. Paul Powers | 218 Brandywine Circle, Englewood, FL 34223

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