

How to Handle the Complexities of Office Romance

By Kenneth A. Shaw

It is everywhere—in government, business, the nonprofit sector. If you are a media junkie, you could easily conclude that things always turn out badly. Not so. But office romance does make things more complex and greater complexity can bring on problems.

Here are three things to remember:

1. Office romance rarely makes it easier for the loving couple or those directly affected. Why? Complexity.
2. Office romance rarely helps a person's career advancement. It might not hurt, but it won't help.
3. If you find yourself in a potential office romance situation, be sure you have your personal and professional priorities in order.

Let's talk about complexity, for this is the heart of the matter. The more complex the office romance, the bigger the problems. Here is a continuum of office relationships with increasing complexity.

1. Husband and wife, or other partners, working in the same unit or in close proximity—something quite common in today's working world. From personal experience, I know this can work if those involved behave professionally and work through the relationship issues that can lead to problems. It does add a layer of complexity, however.
2. Colleagues working in the same unit or in close proximity becoming romantically involved. This is also quite common.

The new couple may, at least for a while, find that others react to them differently. How the couple deals with it will determine if things can return to normal. If there is a commitment to making it work and to keeping things “business as usual,” people will readily adjust. But it does add greater complexity, particularly if there is a breakup.

3. A person in power who is attracted to an employee sharing the attraction. There are occasional happy endings—Jack and Suzy Welch at GE—but understand the complexity level has substantially increased. What happens if the romance fizzles? The former CEO of Boeing learned the pitfalls when his board decided that “his relationship with an employee was an embarrassment to the organization.” Or was a once-hot relationship really sexual coercion? Perceptions change over time, particularly if the breakup is one sided.
4. A person in power wants a relationship with an employee but the attraction isn’t reciprocated. More complexity. Big problems! After rejecting the boss’s advances, does the employee now feel a victim of retaliation? Was the promotion request turned down because the employee rejected the boss’s advances? Or what if the employee agrees to the relationship out of fear of losing his or her job? Both bring on the inevitability of litigation and other deserved negative consequences.
5. An office romance where one or both of the parties are already married to others or otherwise committed. The complexity level just went even higher. You must assume everyone knows. Also, know that people are talking about it. At best, they are interested, perhaps amused. At worst, they are wondering if their boss can be trusted. If the boss easily betrays the trust of a mate, what about me? Can I trust my boss? And trust is the bedrock of effective leadership.

6. The smitten boss makes a fool of himself in spite of an employee's attempts to keep the relationship professional. If you are that person, call your lawyer, update your resume and get professional help. Time isn't on your side.

What if you are the leader of an organization and you have been made aware of a supervisor/employee dalliance? You, of course, were the last to know and were told by a source that it is greatly affecting morale in that unit. What to do?

To do or say nothing would be a mistake, as would an attempt to put a stop to this immediately. Talk to the supervisor. Is it true? Is it serious? Has this happened before with other employees? If this happened more than once, there is a serious problem, and the person isn't supervisor material. The work setting has become his romantic playground.

But if it is the only time this has happened, does he think it is interfering with his effectiveness in leading the unit? Expect him to tell how he would mitigate such concerns. If it is true love, is marriage in the offing? If not, how is it going to end? If it ends badly, how will he answer charges of exploitation? Make it his problem. Remind him of the dangers of such relationships. Remind him, also, of the serious danger (read termination) in not being honest with you. You haven't brought down the hammer but you have served notice that this complex situation is being watched.

In short, know yourself, your work and personal priorities, and act like a professional. Know that office romance adds complexity to your life and to your partner's, and accept that reality. And be big enough to accept the fallout if you have exceeded complexity level two.

And if you are the top boss, know that these matters aren't simple. In the end, you must use good judgment and do what is best for your organization. This is why you are the boss.

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