

# Sex and Romance in the Office and Plant

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Management has never been quite sure how to handle sex and romance. But then who is?

Now, however, business is in a bind. Contemporary culture presses management not to intrude on employees' private lives. At the same time, without experiencing the pleasures or the guilt, management may be legally liable for "sexual harassment"

No self-respecting employer would approve of harassment in any form, much less in sexual behavior. Unfortunately, the line between harassment and voluntary involvement is not always easily discerned. Must a company now scrutinize attachments among its employees to distinguish between the "harasser" and the smitten romantic pleading his or her cause?

The influx of women into management ranks has multiplied contacts between the sexes. The greater overtness about homo sexuality in our society also increases the potential for harassment or voluntary sexual involvement. Under existing law, according to Robert H. Faley of Purdue University, sexual demands made by a supervisor on an employee of the opposite sex are discriminatory, but "where a supervisor who is bisexual places these conditions on both genders ... the insistence on sexual favors would not constitute sex discrimination."

Advocates of traditional morality simply condemn all sexual-physical involvements among people on the work force. In conducting a mini-survey among executives, we encountered only a few respondents who took that position. One said:

"I don't believe in forcing my beliefs on others, but I do acknowledge the responsibility to cultivate a sound moral base within a profitable company. I think a strong moral code is good business—it fosters security and fairness, and provides a stronger base for setting expectations than merely profit considerations."

But most of our respondents feel otherwise; their primary concern is the impact on work performance and company reputation. A recently retired executive of an international electrical appliance firm writes: "Once, when I was general manager, I had as a manager of manufacturing a fast-moving, aggressive and handsome man. He was courteous as well as demanding. He was well liked by the work force."

"One night I received a phone call from his wife telling me that her husband was running around with a secretary in the plant, and she wanted me to fire the secretary. In fact, she said, the same thing had happened in another plant. In another dry, and she had asked the general manager to fire the girl, which he did."

"I told her that if I fired anybody it would be her husband. She never called again."

He explains his reasons. He had, of course, heard rumors of the affair, but it was having absolutely no effect on company operations. The secretary was competent, and so was the man. "The wife was in truth a bitch," he writes, "and we knew for a fact that she was treating her husband badly. Inasmuch as the work performance of both individuals was not being adversely affected, I did not feel it necessary to do anything. I never had the slightest intention to fire either."

But is the company really untouched by the affair? When an executive fixes his roving eye on the secretary of a colleague, the first to be upset is likely to be his own secretary. One executive who became involved with a secretary confesses that his relationship with her boss was impaired. The colleague was afraid his

confidences would be breached to her lover.

On the other hand, some rather straight-laced executives have been frank to acknowledge that on learning of a peer's affair with an attractive employee, resentment has stirred: "Why with him (or her), and not me?"

Of 112 respondents to our questions, 57 said yes when asked, "Do you believe in a policy of absolute hands-off in cases of simple romance?" Thirty-nine said no, and 16 avoided any answer. But the same alternatives with reference to "More complex relationships" brought a response of only 32 saying hands-off and 62 saying intervene, with 19 remaining silent.

Recognizing that "something is going on" is apparently not very difficult in the tight little society of a business firm. As the vice president of a communications network said to us, the signs are there to be read: Suddenly a woman who is not in the formal chain of command begins to show up at meetings alongside an executive. Or someone in a distant department is now making frequent appearances to deliver memos. He and she are staying after hours. Discerning observers notice that two pairs of eyes are meeting more often, followed by cryptic Mona Lisa smiles. Or the executive, who once boasted that his door is always open, now spends more time behind a closed door, and not alone. Any of these is enough to start the millwheels of rumor turning.

On the basis of the anecdotal material submitted to us, there are four gradations of involvement:

1. **Sexual harassment-unwanted or uninvited sexual attentions, behavior that is illegal and impermissible.** If it takes place, the company can protect itself only by having previously promulgated a policy of disapproval and by taking prompt remedial action, possible discharge of the culprit after warnings to desist.
2. **Legitimate courtship, aimed at marriage, by two single individuals.** Companies often take pride in the number of marriages among their personnel. This relationship becomes problematic only if the romance ends unhappily, creating an atmosphere of stress not only for the couple but for their co-workers. Some companies still have a policy that, with marriage, one of the spouses must leave, but this is being challenged by feminists and may, under some circumstances, be illegal as discriminatory since usually it is the woman who goes. One bank president told us that his policy is not to hire spouses, but no one is let go for marrying a fellow employee.
3. **A sexual relationship without benefit of clergy by two unmarried people.** In most such cases, the relationship is carried on in clandestine meetings off the premises: in a growing number of cases, but still relatively few, the parties live together openly in the same quarters.
4. **The illicit affair, involving at least one married person.** Some executives are concerned largely about the psychological disruption a broken marriage may produce, possibly leading in turn to work impairment.

It is primarily the last two categories that are viewed with apprehension by most managements. Of our 112 respondents, 76 replied that people in their organizations had been admonished by their superiors to observe caution"; 50 stated that warnings were issued to discontinue the relationship. A dozen reported that the relationship was penalized by a denial of promotion; 20 indicated that other action, including discharge, had been taken.

Asked whether their companies had experienced adverse effects because of such relationships, a surprisingly large number-almost a third gave no reply. But 32 did say that sexual involvements had led to charges of favoritism, while 52 reported no such experience. A majority of those answering felt that "scandal mongering" had indeed resulted—44 yes to 41 no. A vote of 45 to 43 said morale had been undermined.

There seems to be overwhelming agreement that rank in the hierarchy is of considerable importance, for example, in producing charges of favoritism. There is virtually no problem when the parties are among the rank and file. But if they are in management, particularly where the relationship is between superior and subordinate, there is much concern. Higher authority often seeks a way out by transferring the subordinate to

another unit or branch, if the company is large enough.

Many companies will tolerate a relationship between superior and subordinate if it: is not conducted on company premises; does not utilize company facilities such as a company-rented apartment; involves no company funds, for example use of business credit cards or expense' ac counts to entertain a sex partner; does not divert energy from effective work performance; is not furthered on company time; does not damage the company's pub lic Image; is not deliberately flaunted in a way that offends the sensibilities of others In the organization.

### **Behind the Scenes**

This approach, of course, is based on the theory that what individuals do off the premises and on their own time is no concern of the employer. It recalls the story told of George Horace Lorimer, editor of the Saturday Evening Post. One installment of a serialized novel had ended with an account of a beautiful secretary having dinner with her boss; the next installment began with their having breakfast together. Readers raised a hue and cry that the magazine, a pillar of respectability had abandoned its moral values. Mr. Lorimer answered in an editorial statement- "The Saturday Evening Post is not responsible for what its characters do between installments.

Most top managements prefer to handle discipline for sexual conduct (or misconduct, as some prefer to call it) with little fanfare. Overwhelmingly, our respondents say that their admonitions and discussions usually lead to resignation rather than discharge. The top executives are usually the last to know about the offensive behavior Therefore it is not necessary to strip the individual of his epaulets publicly: the spectators will have no difficulty deducing from the resignation what happened behind the scenes.

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