When Cupid Strikes at the Cubicle

By EILENE ZIMMERMAN
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When Cupid strikes at the office, a whirlwind romance can bring a moment of bliss, but the aftermath may not be so rosy. A new survey shows that nearly half of the employees are involved with someone at work, and more than 40 percent of those relationships end in heartbreak. What challenges you could face in having a romantic relationship at work? And if you decide to pursue a relationship, what should you do? Dr. Martha Stone of Michigan State University, a professor of psychology and author of the book "Couplet: Making Love and Getting Married in Modern Times," offers advice on how to make it work.

A. That's because working together can itself be a kind of aphrodisiac. In a phenomenon known as the "exposure effect," people who are seen together more often tend to like each other more, said Dr. Orbuch. The phenomenon is actually arousal-producing, she said, "it's not really beneficial for companies to enforce policies like that." The consensus among experts is that workplace romances can be a mixed bag, and companies need to weigh the risks before they set up rules to discourage them.

B. The first rule of any workplace relationship is that it must be consensual and agreeable to all parties involved. Dr. Orbuch said. "The consequence of a bad breakup is that the ex-employee might file a complaint, such as sexual harassment, and if there are other employees involved, they might feel uncomfortable." Dr. Orbuch said. "The risk of a bad breakup is that the ex might bring in a lawyer to file a lawsuit."

C. Workplace romances are exciting because they usually involve two people who have already met at work, said Dr. Orbuch. "This is a great opportunity because you have a lot of common interests, like the workplace environment and the people you work with."

D. Make it clear that you don't want the end of the relationship to have a negative effect on your career. If you decide to pursue a relationship, check your employer's handbook to make sure it's even allowed at your company. If it is, whether the proper way to proceed?

E. Over the last several decades, companies have become more flexible about workplace romances, said Mara B. Levin, a partner specializing in labor and employment law at Herrick, Feinstein in Manhattan. People spend so much time at the office that co-worker romances are now almost inevitable, and companies generally can't easily prohibit them, she said. "Workplace romances are exciting because they usually involve two people who have already met at work, said Dr. Orbuch. "This is a great opportunity because you have a lot of common interests, like the workplace environment and the people you work with."

F. "Most employees are 'at will' employees, meaning they can be fired for any reason as long as it doesn't break the law," she said. "I actually had a situation where the manager decided it would not be productive for both employees to be married and working together."

G. "A contract," in which each party acknowledges that the relationship is consensual and agrees to abide by harassment and discrimination policies. But she advises companies to avoid any awkwardness, said Melodie R. Schaefer, executive director of the office of Employment and Compensation Law at the Chicago School of Professional Psychology, Los Angeles campus.

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