



Valentine's Day is coming. As an employer, do you ever think about how these types of holidays affect your workplace? You might want to. Workplace romances happen. Employees spend so much of their time together at work, invest in their workplace and teammates, and share in after work and weekend activities, so it's going to

happen. And, it's not necessarily a bad thing, but you should consider how it affects your business.

There are ways in which you can alleviate the challenges that come with workplace romances. Some companies have tried to shut them down with policies, some leave it up to HR to police, and some close their eyes to romantic relationships going on around the office unless and until they blow up with a sexual harassment claim, an angry spouse shows up at your company's front door, or co-workers complain because one of the "couple" appears to be getting preferential treatment as a result of the relationship. As an employment lawyer and senior HR executive turned strategic HR consultant, I've seen it all, investigated it all, defended management in these types of claims, and proactively partnered with business leaders to head off potential situations.

Forbidding romance in the workplace isn't going to prevent it from happening, and it's usually counterproductive for most company cultures. The great part about managing humans is they are human, and therein lies the challenge. Offering some thought partnership for business leaders, below are some thoughts on workplace romances you probably need to know now, because love waits for no one.

Managers And The Employees They Report To Should Not Hook Up.

Even though I said it's not a bad thing to forbid romance in your workplace, there is an exception - relationships between supervisors and direct reports. Beware. Businesses, your board of directors, advisory board, most of your employees, and the law (if the relationship goes awry) will want you to prohibit this. And, the obvious conflict of interest that comes from such relationships is a culture killer. For the subordinates, these relationships are often a lose-lose situation. When they receive rewards and recognition, other employees will resent them (40% of employees complain about favoritism among co-workers in romantic relationships). And, if the couple breaks up, it's usually really tough for the subordinate to stick around. Most importantly, these relationships can easily lead to lawsuits for the employer and the manager. If the relationship ends badly, the possibility of a claim of sexual harassment increases substantially, causing major expense and administrative distractions for all.

Workplace Romances Can Get Very Messy.

Ugly breakups, gossip, spouses calling HR/the CEO, abusing the company's instant messaging system to love chat, sexting on a company cell phone, Facebook and Instagram rants: the list of ways a workplace romance can get messy goes on and on. And, some of those ways can be devastating to all involved. Consider how easily these situations can turn into sexual harassment lawsuits -- 1 overly emotional reaction from a spurned paramour for a seemingly innocent situation can require attorneys and state/federal regulatory agencies to get involved to investigate legal allegations. Statistics show that 1 in 6 workplace relationships involve 1 person who is married, adding a whole new layer of complexity, negative effects, and hurt feelings.

Respondents to a Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM) survey stated they discouraged or forbade dating in the workplace due to concerns with potential sexual harassment claims, retaliation, assertions that a relationship was not consensual, civil suits, and workplace disharmony if the relationship should end. Depending on the discretion of the dating couple, gossip in the workplace can become rampant and disruptive. The SHRM survey respondents stated they also worry about losing valuable employees who might seek employment elsewhere if the relationship ends.

Your HR folks should know how to handle the situation and you, as a business owner, cannot afford your HR team to be naive to the consequences. This is another reason why it helps to be proactive when it comes to workplace romances; make sure you and/or your HR team member(s) are able to have open and courageous communications with your team members when these situations first arise.

Women Are Affected More Than Men.

Even in the face of progress post the #MeToo movement, according to research, women in romantic work relationships still have to deal with negative perceptions more than men: in part because people still unfairly assume that women leverage sex to advance their careers, while men are merely seeking companionship. This double standard means women are more likely to be victims of the "tea" around the office. And gossip isn't only a source of hurt feelings; it's also an easy route to lost productivity, reputation damage, and eventual lawsuits. Think about the damage it inflicts on your culture.

Workplace Romances Do Happen More Than You May Think.

According to a survey produced by job site Vault.com, 58% of employees have engaged in a romantic relationship with a colleague. A surprising 72% of those over 50 years old have been romantically involved with a co-worker. 27% of employees say they are open to engaging in romantic relationships with coworkers. That's 1 in 4 of your employees. As an employer, you can't afford to ignore office romances.

Some Rules For Workplace Romances Should Be Formally Considered.

It's important for companies to consider having some written policies about romance in the workplace — probably somewhere near rules on sexual harassment in your Employee

Handbook. Taking a proactive approach helps your employees to be on notice where you stand as an organization as far as tolerance, acceptance, and where you'll draw the line, especially when it comes to supervisor/subordinate relationships. It also ensures those open and courageous communications that might need to take place are simply to reiterate the Company's culture and policies, and not setting up new love birds for failure.

For instance, some companies have rules called dating in the workplace or fraternization policies, which include rules about public displays of affection (PDA), while some talk about not bringing your personal couples quarrels into the workplace. Thinking about putting something in place before there is an incident is a smart way to prevent the team from gossiping that a certain situation was the catalyst to a policy – that becomes engrained in people's heads and leads to not so fond legends and lure for companies to deal with.

And, some companies require the couple to sign a "Love Contract." Love Contracts are agreements where both parties in the romantic relationship state to their employer that their relationship is voluntary and consensual, that they know the employer's sexual harassment policies, and that they won't hold their employer responsible if/when the relationship dissolves. According to a study done of HR professionals, 75% say they don't work. This doesn't mean that Love Contracts are bad. It's just not a one size fits all for every company. More likely, it means HR cannot rely on them to prevent workplace romances from becoming problems.

The best way to avoid romantic drama in the workplace is to be transparent with your team, set the guidelines and clearly communicate them to your employees, and train ~ do this before those relationships begin, at the onset of the relationships, and at any other necessary points in time. If your organization is a culture of open communication, you'll be able to walk down the path of workplace romances without stepping on landmines.