Could this topic ring bells? Wedding bells? Alarm bells? Both!

The workplace is where many of us spend 1/3 or more of our life during our adult years. It is a common place for people, who share common interests, to meet, fall in love, marry and grow old together.

In my last role in corporate life, anyone in my company could come to discuss, confidentially and off the record, workplace issues. Romance in the workplace was discussed many times. The romance road can be fraught with challenges for the individuals involved, their managers and colleagues, and the business.

A couple often starts off a relationship intending for it to remain a secret for whatever reason. This may be positive intent, but often sooner than expected, people become aware. Even if coworkers do not know for sure, it is often entertaining to speculate!

This is where the dilemmas begin; here are a few examples:
If one of the parties is in a managerial or supervisory role, allegations of favoritism can begin. Why was a plum assignment given to him? She can come in late now. He gets to go on a business trip with the boss. She got a higher rating on her review. The manager’s credibility and integrity as viewed by staff can immediately begin to suffer … even if the manager is sure that his/her actions are no different than before the relationship began.

Loss of credibility is not limited to the romantically involved manager and staff member. I have listened to staff raise concerns about the management levels above the romantically involved manager. “Why is the director/VP/leader not doing something to resolve this? They are aware of the issue and they do nothing!” Management must be aware that loss of their integrity can develop because of their inaction to address an issue such as this.

In many institutions, there are policies about nepotism, but these refer most often to relationships that are familial, permanent or official. So what happens in the budding romance or the office fling? Who makes the decision as to who is more valuable to the business if there is discord in the office? Is it acceptable for coworkers to endure inappropriate behavior because one, or both, of the romantically involved parties are important to the business? The top salesperson? The best account rep? The head of one of the key departments?

If the parties are involved in a romantic relationship that terminates unsatisfactorily for one of the parties, workplace repercussions may be severe. Could a company reduce the potential allegations of sexual harassment and discrimination if leaders took a more proactive stance?

What if the romantic relationship involves a staff member and a vendor? Businesses often have a Code of Conduct that directly addresses conflicts of interest.

So if you are one of the parties in a romantic relationship, what should you do?

Talk about the consequences with the other party. If the relationship is one you think is going to last for the long term, agree what steps to take to reduce any negative repercussions. That may be as simple as communicating with your leaders; going public. Own the steps you may need to initiate, such as moving apart from the same department, or finding another job.

Remember that often people know (or think they know) about your relationship in the workplace before you do!

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