



# HRxaminer

*Examining practical HR issues business owners  
and managers encounter every day*

## Workplace Relationships: They're All Around You



It appears that as Valentine's Day approaches each year, I'm contacted by someone in the media to comment about workplace relationships.

This week I am pleased to share that I've been quoted in the *Wall Street Journal*. It's a great discussion of how various companies handle romantic relationships in their workplaces.

Here's a link to that article:

[WSJ.com - Office romance can seriously disrupt a small company. Here's how to handle it.](#)

Of course, in the exchange to help the writer (Barbara Haislit in this case), I usually come up with lots more "wisdom" than can fit in the article. So I've decided to share some of that exchange with you.

How do businesses handle office romances?

This is a difficult area for businesses as the issues that can arise with employees in a relationship can affect the productivity, morale and comfort of a department or a small company - very quickly. Yet, many of us find our partners in the workplace, so starting relationships at work continues to become more and more common.

The most important thing a business owner or leader can do is to start talking to the individuals as soon as he or she becomes aware of the situation. Chances are the leader is the last to know and people are already gossiping, judging, and hoping the relationship doesn't ruin the work culture.

The leader needs to first decide what the "rules" are for interoffice romantic relationships, especially if the two people report to one another. Some companies are very clear that if you want to have a romantic relationship within a reporting relationship, one of the parties needs to leave the organization to avoid a conflict of interest. I think that this occurs less frequently, but it is a possibility. If the relationship is affecting or can affect what the leader has taken years to build, then the business comes first.

More often, the business leader sits down with the two parties - together or separate - to discuss the potential issues the relationship may create in the workplace. Here are a few items to discuss:

1. Discuss the potential issues of harassment, discrimination and retaliation. The two employees in the relationship need to guarantee that they are not going to work

differently, communicate differently or treat people differently as a result of their relationship. For example, if they are "romantic" in the workplace and others observe it and feel uncomfortable, the situation is ripe for a harassment complaint, which we all know can lead to expensive litigation.

2. Discuss what might happen if the couple is struggling or splits up. Emotions need to be left at home and not brought into the workplace. So if the two are having a disagreement and they're talking about the other person at work, blatantly not talking to each other at work, or making each other or others uncomfortable at work, we have a more serious problem. The manager needs to make it clear that this behavior won't be tolerated during or following the relationship.
3. Favoritism is another concern, whether or not the two people are in a supervisor-employee relationship. If it is perceived that someone is getting better treatment, jobs, pay, etc. because they are dating someone in the company, the impact is huge. In case of a reporting relationship, the leader may need to take over some of the supervision (at minimum any pay-related decisions) to make sure that there is no unfair treatment occurring.

Some employers require the two individuals to sign an agreement asserting that they understand the policies of the company, agree not to violate those policies and that they will not sue the company for harassment or discrimination should the relationship go bad and they decide to blame the company. While this kind of an agreement may not hold up in court, it does remind the employees of the expected behavior.

The most important piece is to ensure that there is an open dialog between the manager and the employees, to give them feedback on what is being observed and to hold them accountable to whatever has been agreed upon as appropriate, professional, non-discriminatory behavior in the workplace.

The two employees should understand that one or both of them could be terminated for breaches in policy resulting from the relationship. And the manager needs to enforce the policies and protocols that are established. Otherwise the morale of the observing employees can rapidly decline, likely taking the business in the same direction - even if a decline in business effectiveness occurs as a result of wasted time chatting about the "interesting" situation.

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## About Arlene Vernon

Arlene has provided HR consulting and management training services to over 300 organizations since starting HRx, Inc. in 1992.

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