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## CAREER COUCH

# When Cupid Strikes at the Cubicle

By EILENE ZIMMERMAN  
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**Q.** *You are interested in dating someone you work with. You can't help thinking that had you met this person outside of work, you might not have been as attracted. Why is that?*



Chris Reed

**A.** That's because working together can itself be a kind of aphrodisiac. In a phenomenon known as the "[mere exposure effect](#)," people who see each other continuously tend to like each other more, said Terri L. Orbuch, a psychologist, relationship therapist and research professor at the Institute for Social Research at the [University of Michigan](#).

Workplace romances are exciting because they usually start in secrecy, Dr. Orbuch said. "The secretiveness is actually arousal-producing," she said, "so it is important to make sure you are attracted to the person and not just the secrecy."

**Q.** *You really think this could be the one, but you aren't sure if dating a co-worker is even allowed at your company. If it is, what's the proper way to proceed?*

**A.** 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 almost inevitable, and company policies now rarely prohibit them, she said.

"I think, in part, what motivated employers was that they had talented people at a high level becoming involved or getting married, and they didn't want to force them to leave," she said. "It's not really beneficial for companies to enforce policies like that."

Remember that no matter what happens in the relationship, you will still have to deal with this person at work, so start with coffee or lunch rather than a date. That way, if you decide you're not interested after all — or it's clear that the other person isn't — you can avoid any awkwardness, said Melodie R. Schaefer, executive director of the office of applied professional psychology at the Chicago School of Professional Psychology, Los Angeles campus.

If you decide to pursue a relationship, check your employee handbook to make sure it's not prohibited, Ms. Levin said. Some companies may ask employees to sign a "love contract," in which each party acknowledges that the relationship is consensual and agrees to abide by harassment and discrimination policies. But she advises companies that such contracts aren't needed, because they apply only during the relationship, not after a breakup.

**Q.** *What if you are interested in dating someone who works for you?*

**A.** Even if there is no policy against it, a supervisor and a subordinate should never date, Ms. Levin said. As a manager, you have to review the person's performance, provide feedback and make decisions on promotions, and that could be hard to do objectively.

Beyond that, other employees may think that the person you are involved with is getting preferential treatment. And if the relationship sours and you take negative action toward your former sweetheart — such as a poor performance review — he or she could contend discrimination, Ms. Levin said.

**Q.** *What challenges you could face in having a romantic relationship at work?*

**A.** One big issue is how to separate your personal relationship and your professional relationship. Displays of affection or arguing at the office make co-workers uncomfortable — and are unprofessional. So both of you must be aware of how your behavior is affecting others.

While you are in the first blush of a romance — feeling flushed, weak-kneed and infatuated — the last thing you want to think about is breaking up. Nevertheless, you should set up ground rules about treating each other respectfully and professionally if you do go separate ways, Dr. Orbuch said.

**Q.** *If you do break up — even if it's hard to imagine now — how can you comfortably interact with this person later?*

**A.** Discuss how to move forward as friends and colleagues now that you aren't seeing each other anymore.

"Make it clear that you don't want the end of the relationship to have a negative effect on either of your careers," Ms. Schaefer says. Never gossip or badmouth your ex to colleagues. Doing so will only reflect poorly on you and make working together difficult, she said.

**Q.** *On the other hand, if you decide to marry or live together, how should you handle that professionally?*

**A.** Let your managers know as soon as possible, Ms. Levin said. In certain situations, management may feel that your marriage will negatively affect the work product or the working environment — and may ask one of you to leave the company. Such instances, however, are becoming more uncommon.

"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."

In a vast majority of cases, though, the likely consequences are best wishes and a bottle of Champagne.

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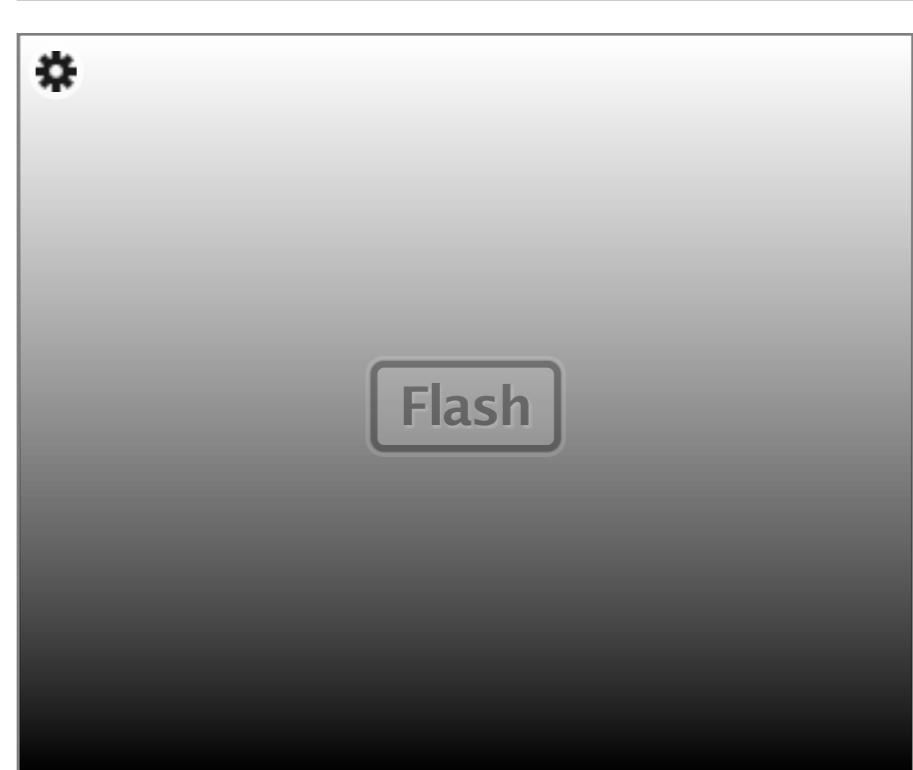
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