

Navigating workplace *romances*

Karen Gately, founder of Corporate Dojo, people-management specialist, and author, teaches us the dos and don'ts of handling workplace romances in a #MeToo era



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So, you're keen on that guy or girl in the office. That's OK, no need to push the panic button if you're worried about what pursuing a romance might mean for your career. Plenty of people meet at work, fall in love, get involved, walk down the aisle and even have kids. Of course, there are also the stories of people falling in love, making dumb decisions and ruining their professional reputations in the process. But that needn't be you.

In the #MeToo era you can be forgiven for also feeling a little cautious about your innocent intentions being misconstrued, or worse, your consensual actions being used against you down the track. While sexual harassment is a big issue in many industries, the instances of people making fallacious claims against innocent people in my experience is rare.

With a modicum of decorum and a dose of respectful consideration you're unlikely to find yourself in hot water. Some of the most important dos and don'ts of workplace dating include:

Take no to mean no.

Even if you are certain your colleague fancies you back, if they are uncomfortable pursuing a relationship with someone at work, don't keep trying. It's fine to maintain contact and engage with them in a friendly way. Repeated requests for them to change their mind, however, is stepping across the line.

Ask before you touch.

To avoid being slapped, physically or metaphorically, make sure you've had a conversation about your mutual interest in

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one another, before deciding to touch your colleague. If for whatever reason you are reading the signals incorrectly, even putting your hand on their forearm 'too often' can become an issue.

Maintain respectful boundaries.

While your love interest might at first feel the same way as you do, being demanding of their attention at work, or displaying affection that makes them feel uncomfortable, can soon have them changing their mind. Asking probing questions about topics you know they can't talk about, can be just as off putting and place unnecessary pressure on your relationship.

Know when to back out.

Be alert to the early signs of things not working out. Be respectful by speaking up early if you find yourself unsure or no longer interested in a romantic relationship. Leaving someone feeling used and abused is one sure way to inspire them to turn on you and make life harder than it needs to be.

Don't get involved with people who report to you, directly or indirectly.

Most employers will have policies prohibiting personal relationships between a manager and their staff member. Even if your employer is silent on the matter, contemplate

the challenges you will face managing that person's performance, maintaining objectivity and avoiding concerns of favouritism and confidentiality from other members of the team.

Don't get drunk and handsy at work functions.

Public displays of affection are rarely appropriate at work, including at work sponsored functions. When the person you're demonstrating affection toward hasn't signed up for the deal, you're well and truly in the danger zone. Alcohol and work parties, all too often lead to people pursuing office romances with people who just aren't interested. How big a problem that becomes depends of the purser's ability to get the message and move on.

The most important thing to remember is not to allow your lustful emotions to completely overtake your brain. While even the thought of a potential romance can be exhilarating, it can also make you lose perspective and make decisions that you otherwise wouldn't. No matter how irresistible you find your colleague, keep the office the office. In other words, the environment in which you get on with working and maintaining focus on what your employer is paying you to do.

