

The Globe and Mail

March 1, 2006

When bosses are 'an item,' here's how to tread

By SUSAN PINKER

Dear Susan,

A few years ago, the chief marketing manager of one of our product lines married a member of her sales team. Since then, both have been promoted; she is now vice-president of global marketing and he has become chief marketing manager of a different product.

Though he now reports to a different boss, that boss reports to his wife. So people are still reluctant to disagree with the marketing manager because of the fear he might complain to his wife and it might harm their careers. What should we do?

--Yes Man

Dear Yes Man,

Like it or not, workplace relationships are here to stay. When 58 per cent of employees have been involved in an office romance, according to a 2005 Vault survey, and 20 per cent of all managers and executives have met their spouses at work, this from a 2003 survey by the American Management Association, what we have is a trend.

Still, the kind of chill you describe makes otherwise respectable professionals who get involved skulk around like guilty teenagers. "I think our discretion was all about maintaining a professional demeanour," a friend wrote primly in an e-mail, explaining why she kept her relationship with a colleague a secret from co-workers for a year, indeed, until after they were married.

George Clooney's film *Good Night, and Good Luck* captures this zeitgeist perfectly. Ostensibly a period piece about reporting in the McCarthy era, there's nonetheless a peculiar subplot about two journalists in the newsroom. They're married but, like ring-around-the-collar or dyed blondes, only the viewing audience knows for sure. Just as the moral high ground is laid bare in the film's climax, their relationship is exposed. That's when one of the journalists is asked to leave, as if the office is being purged of corrupting elements. Being married, apparently, is just one more darned problem for the office manager.

But that was then and this is now. As long as there's no reporting relationship, acceptance about office romance is growing among employers: 93 per cent of managers and executives in the AMA survey thought that co-workers dating was okay. But further down the corporate food chain, 76 per cent of rank-and-file employees thought workplace romances downright "dangerous," according to a 2001 survey from the Society for Human Resource Management.

And reactions are most negative when adultery is involved; women, in particular, don't like it when a boss (of either sex) gets entangled with an underling, found Gwen Jones, an associate professor of management at Fairleigh Dickinson University in New Jersey, who canvassed 158 adult students about their attitudes to hierarchical workplace romances in a study she published in 1999.

Still, there's no evidence to indicate that anyone has suffered because of this couple's particular relationship -- and until there is, you need to give them the benefit of the doubt. Treat the marketing manager the way you would other co-workers, even if he is sleeping with the queen bee.

Extend him the same courtesy, which means that, if you disagree with him about a work issue, be sure to offer points germane to the discussion. And keep moral umbrage out of it.

If there's a rapport between you, and you think the team's morale is at stake, you could even approach him privately to clue him in to the prevailing winds. Then it would be up to him to clear the air, perhaps with his direct supervisor's help.

Like other couples who work together, he and his wife may know what others are thinking, and may be turning cartwheels to make sure there's no reason to worry. They know that favouritism is just assumed in that wink-wink sort of way. It's like that old salvo, guilty until proven innocent. Or is it the other way around?

Dear Susan,

I teach at a highly regarded Catholic secondary school. The principal manages through conflict and neglect. There are some teachers she hasn't talked to for months, and I'm one of them. Many teachers are leaving due to the atmosphere. I've tried to talk to my department head but it hasn't helped. Should I move schools before my blood pressure goes up?

-- Miss Jean Brodie

Dear Miss Brodie,

Your first temptation might be to request a transfer. But consider this: There is usually an aspect of every job that's odious along with a payoff that compensates. Do you relish any part of your work? Your subject matter? The pimply faces lighting up with new knowledge? Your colleagues? How about that Goth kid you've been advocating for?

If the answer is none of the above, it's time to move on.

But if you have reason to stay, there are ways to help you live with, or at least outlast, this principal. Hers is a stressful job that most school administrators hold for just a few years before being transferred to other schools themselves.

Although research shows that schools and kids do best when a principal instills a cohesive school culture, many principals are so overloaded with bureaucratic tasks that, sadly, they have to make time to get to know teachers, peek into their classrooms or communicate their philosophy.

I've seen principals spend long hours finding the budget for roof repairs or solving basic staffing and scheduling snafus. So, even if a principal's primary job is to breathe life into a school through its people, yours may be so distracted by minutiae that she's not aware of your existence, much less dissatisfaction.

The principal may be distant, distracted or over her head, but you should not take her neglect personally. Resist playing victim and weigh your options.

If she ignores your requests, you can still make small talk as you pass her in the hall or the teacher's room. She's mute but that doesn't mean you have to be -- work at keeping the door open.

Try to form a mini-coalition of teachers who will provide the support you're not getting from above. Most schools have a core of experienced senior teachers; look for one to mentor you.

Is there a staff council at your school? Through it, you could discuss the issue with other teachers in the same boat, and together request a meeting with the principal.

Even if she's overwhelmed or trying to divide and conquer, the principal can hardly ignore a co-ordinated request for a meeting. At the very least, there will be some record of an attempt to resolve this problem before you take it higher.

Going to the top should be a last resort but, if you've tried everything else and are still frozen out, write a letter as a group to the school's board. "Principals are accountable to the board of directors, who would be dismayed to hear of a staff divided against itself," said a school board member I consulted, adding, reverentially, that "good teachers are gold."

I'd say they're more like meteors. Simple specks of dust, meteors glow like fire when they enter the earth's atmosphere. Even years after they've left the classroom, a beloved teacher can have the same effect. If you can leave your mark in this principal's orbit, you have your answer.

Susan Pinker is a psychologist and writer.

Copyright Susan Pinker 2006