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How to Have an Office Romance

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Note to Readers: *This free e-newsletter, sent only upon request, comes from Dr. Kathleen Begley, owner of Write Company Plus communications training. She writes weekly on topics connected to business and personal success. Dr. Begley recently launched a new blog called "Meandering to a Different Drummer." Click onto the website address at the end of this article to read her one-paragraph musings on life, death, and how to floss your teeth without using your hands.*

Late-night comedian David Letterman did it. So did later-night comedian Jimmy Kimmel. Dozens of more serious TV moguls also have thrown themselves into this activity; these examples include CBS President Les Moonves and talk show host Donny Deutsch. I'm speaking, of course, about having sexual affairs with people at work, something that celebrity news machines lately are treating like a brand new, just discovered, never-before-seen phenomenon.

I'm unsure why gossip mongers seem clueless about the long-ago exploits of actor Errol Flynn and his co-stars, director Alfred Hitchcock and his actresses, President John F. Kennedy and his secretaries – but there it is. Since men and women have worked alongside each other -- whether building pyramids for the pharaohs in Egypt, serving dinners to the emperors in Italy, tilling the fields for wealthy royals in France -- I'm quite certain that more than a few have taken tongues-a-wagging long lunch hours together. My suspicion is that the number of semi-private goings-on simply have become more public in this media age.

According to a survey conducted in 2006 by a research company named Vault, 60 percent of American employees confessed to having gone through an office relationship. An additional 9 percent said they wished they had. With today's hectic schedules, the workplace is often the most convenient place to meet a romantic partner, according to Mark Penn, author of *Microtrends*. "The office has become the 21st century singles bar," Penn writes. "Water is the next gin and tonic, and Muzak the new club beat."

But be forewarned: office affairs are not a free-for-all. They may, in fact, turn out to be really expensive in terms of your professional reputation. The basic question: is the long-run cost to you going to be greater than the short-term benefit? Yes, yes, yes, I know the question is super unromantic. But try to pull yourself together for a lucid moment and use your common sense.

In an article prompted by the revelation of Letterman's affairs with several staffers, including one named Stephanie Birkitt, Newsweek columnist Julia Baird gave a clear warning to people toying with the idea of an affair with a superior, in the work sense. "Your career should never be in the hands of someone you are regularly naked with," she writes. Baird points out that women bedded by male bosses tend to suffer much more than the men. "Letterman's ratings are up, his advertising is intact, he is still married," she writes. "Birkitt is on paid leave, is being dogged by photographers, and will not be known forevermore as The Woman Dave Letterman Slept With." Some other things to consider before you jump into bed, or onto an office sofa, with a colleague:

Know the policy. Some organizations look much more askance at interoffice canoodling than others. If your company has written rules prohibiting sexual affairs under pain of being fired, I'd seriously think about going on www.match.com to find a suitable mate.



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Consider marital status. Adultery rarely is a good idea, even outside the workplace. If you choose to mess around with someone else's spouse, be prepared to become the brunt of office gossip, none of it flattering. Still planning to go full steam ahead? Think about the likelihood that news of your affair will reach the ears of the betrayed husband or wife. Need I say more?

Love equally. Most companies will give a pass to two singles dating as long as they're on the same level. But big trouble can arise if one of you supervises the other. Reread the naked comment above. Besides, secret liaisons simply aren't fair to all the individuals resisting the urge to merge.

Think realistically. At the outset of your fling, I bet you'll think that you'll always be deeply in lust. That belief stems from a psychological state called limerance, which is defined by shrinks as the near insanity humans experience when falling under another's spell. Sooner or later, however, mental health will return and one of you may want out. Do you really care to see your ex-lover every day for the next 10, 20, or 30 years?

Be discreet. Despite scenes you may watch on office-based television shows, the supplies closet or office floor rarely are ideal places for romance. Rather than flaunt your libidos to your peers, do as the old saying goes: get a room, preferably miles and miles and miles from your workplace. If you work in Los Angeles, I'd suggest New York City.

Avoid office email. According to labor law, your employer has every right to read your besotted prose to your lover. Let's face it: periodic work evaluations are stressful enough without any hanky panky going on. Just imagine walking into your manager's office for your annual review and finding your graphic emails to another colleague stacked up on the desk. I doubt that your boss's purpose would be to go over grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

Face the facts. Sooner or later, your romance will become public knowledge, no matter how expertly you try to hide it. It takes very little background in body language for a third person to catch a furtive glimpse across the meeting table, a look of longing at the copier, a flirtatious wink in the elevator. While lovers often have the common senses to keep their hands to themselves in the office, few have the discipline or self-awareness to do the same with their loving gaze. A word to the quasi-wise: the eyes are the windows of the affair.

Dr. Kathleen Begley has written seven books and gives corporate seminars on topics such as writing persuasively, presenting confidently, and managing positively. You can call her at 610-429-1562 or e-mail her at KBegley@writecompanyplus.com. She responds to everybody.