

Manager's Hot Seat

Case 1: Office Romance: Groping for Answers

The Meeting

R: Morning

B: Good morning

R: I don't know if you read your email yet

B: I'm just about to

R: I got an email from Abby and I know that she sent one to you, and since you haven't read your email I want to try to nip this in the bud and explain what this email is about. She's accusing me of sexual harassment. What had happened, let me just give you some back history first. First of all, my wife and I are having marital problems and during that time we separated and Abby and I, because we have seen each other, because we have liked each other decided, let's see what can happen.

B: How long ago was this?

R: This was 6 months ago. Last 2 weeks it has really become stressed and that's why production is down. And I know that you know these numbers. But the problem being is that she is fighting everything. She doesn't want to work with me, she doesn't want to give me a hand with anything, and I'm managing it all on my own. And then she's threatening me. Now this is in response to another email that I sent her, which she refers to in there. Now here is that email, and let me explain. Right now I'm just saying if you don't want to get back together with me, and I had wrote her an email saying why don't we get back together. Well she didn't respond positively so I said fine, if you're uncomfortable on our team, I'll do everything that I can to help facilitate you moving to a different group. I wanted to help her, I wanted to solve this problem and instead she's writing me these threatening things like you need to change departments, I'm going to sue you, I'm going to sue the company and take everybody down.

B: Ok well whether anybody sues anybody, we'll get to that. First, of all, why are you guys using company email to communicate about personal issues? How long have you worked here?

R: I have worked here 6 years.

B: Six years. And at 6 years you didn't know our company policy was not to discuss personal issues over company email?

R: I know our policies and I apologize for that. But I think this is the issue we need to address, not about the emails.

B: Well it's an important policy here. The whole picture here is that you two have done something that you shouldn't have done, which is carry on an intimate relationship, how intimate I don't really know and I don't know who else knows this. But that intimacy has caused problems, not only in production but potentially in lawsuits and certainly personalities are involved and that's going to spread like wildfire.

R: So what does it matter that I emailed her or not? In fact you can see she is being passive aggressive by sending emails instead of coming to you, with me and having a sit down. Why aren't we having a face to face on this?

B: Well I don't think we should be having a face to face about your relationship with Abby. I do think we should be having face to face about your relationship visa vie the office and that you shouldn't have one.

R: We don't have one.

B: We're not a marriage counseling company. I have no interest in having a conversation with you and Abby about your relationship.

R: Look you're married too.

B: Yes I am.

R: You understand what the situation is, you know ups and downs, and you get through these peaks and valleys.

B: Oh no, I don't. There is a very different situation here. I have been married for 25 years to the same woman and I have never had an affair at the office and discussed it in email. So let's not get into my personal problems and my personal life, let's stay right here. First of all as my employee, and what I really have a problem with, and I want you to tell me right now, is that you will cease any personal conversations with Abby via email. Promise me that.

R: I will, I promise you that.

B: Good, now second, we are going to have to sit down with Abby and talk about production. I am going to have to deal with this directly since she copied me. And the first person I'm going to talk to today after we have this conversation, you and I, is to call human resources and find out what they think we should do.

R: Well exactly. I think that we need to get rid of her, or she at least needs to go to another division because she's not even willing to work with me anymore.

B: And that's what she claims of you. And there are always 2 sides to each story, and that's why the first thing I want to do is talk to human resources and find out what they think we should do, and I'm telling you that as a manager, you know that is my first call. Secondly, I'm going to talk to Abby separately, privately.

R: Look at the things that she saying. This is not about your decision, you know as soon as someone says this is not about, you know leading me on, she's talking about this is what it's all about.

B: Randall. It's just words.

R: She's not being professional, that's my point.

B: Of course not. It's an emotional reaction put on paper. So what we are going to do is address this separately. We are going to have Abby sit in here without you. Go over, not your marital problems or her relationship with you, but talk about her working with you and see what we have to do to go forward from here.

R: We can't work together, I can tell you right now.

B: It's clear form the two emails that neither one of you can. So obviously we are going to have to do something about that. Who goes where, who goes when well have to decide? I'm not deciding this now I'm not deciding without talking to Abby.

R: Why are you smiling about this?

B: I'm not smiling about anything. What I'm saying is that I'm going to have to go through an analysis of the situation. I'm not going to listen to your decision and your reaction to this and say it's the right one or the only one. Because it's not, I'm sure she has her own version of this. Doesn't she?

R: I'm sure she does. She does from right there, you can see that she's reacting. She's been hurt and that's what it's all about

B: OK well I'm not saying you're right and I'm not saying you're wrong. What I'm saying to you very simply and clearly is that I'm disappointed that a manager with 6 years with this company could let this happen and not come to me sooner saying there was a problem brewing. Or that you had even been in the situation, you come to me now, you obviously had to because she had written the email. Had she not, this might have gone on for more time than it did. I'm disappointed in you in that. That's number one, two, I'm not going to take this at face value. I'm going to speak to Abby.

R: But I want to hear what she has to say. Are you going to talk to me about what she has to say or is that going to happen when the 3 of us sit down?

B: I sincerely doubt that we are going to sit down in a conversation to go over your relationship with her because it's a little too complex right now.

R: I don't want to talk about the relationship; I want to talk about the work relationship.

B: These emails are all about the relationship, both of them, so there is no way our conversation isn't going to be about the relationship. I have no interest in that. I have interest in 2 things. One, fixing the problem, and two, moving on. That's my job and that's what we are going to do. We are going to make our numbers this quarter, despite the recent downturn. And we are going to do it with either you and or Abby working together if we can resolve it and if we can't one of you is going to be working somewhere else.

Afterthoughts

B: I think the meeting with Randall went as well as it could have given his agitation and how he felt, and what he was trying to tell me, it was pretty big stuff to him. I don't think it's too late to prevent litigation to the company. I think the steps that can be taken are really preliminary right now in what has to happen. Lots of investigation and separation of the parties but you know I think you can stop litigation. I think it may have gone too far in potential outcomes but I was trying to get him to stop, and I didn't want to go any further in the conversation with him until I got all the facts. I didn't think that he had the only valid view and I wanted to get both of them before we made any actions or presumptions. But I also did make him want to understand really clearly that what he had done was very wrong, what he was continuing to do was really wrong and I wanted to make sure it didn't get any wronger. If he saw her in the hallway or saw anyone, I almost thought it was better for him to leave for the day frankly and sort of separate everything out until we had a chance to find out the facts. I don't think it was premature to talk about termination and transfer because it's very natural for this situation. Many companies have policies that are already stated in the human resources documents, that many employees sign and probably don't read them. But they are there that say you cannot use email for these kind of purposes for one. Number two, you cannot, if you are in fact caught at a manager's level I don't think it was high enough in this situation, certainly one of the outcomes of that is termination. Certainly transfer is extremely likely. The managers of these organizations have lots of leeway to protect everyone and everything, as long as they follow the guidelines, so I don't think it was premature. I don't think that people can be terminated automatically for having an interoffice relationship but I do think that

there are certain guidelines in every organization that lay out what can and cannot happen, or what should and should not happen rather, and more specifically tell you what will happen if you do. If you are caught in this relationship, there are very general reasons in employee documents that talk about things. But more specifically these days, there are relationships where you could have those things laid out and you should be following them. I think the most positive outcome of this right now, is that there is nothing less than the separation of the two. There is no way that they can stay together, not for their own sake, or for the company's sake. I am not certain that they can even work in the same building. As much as I want to believe that they are capable of become adult about this they are adults that got themselves into this. So I think I took a stronger stance as a manager because I think that's the way it should be handled. And I think that the outcome is that one will be gone, or they both will be gone frankly. I was concerned about the email because it is easily sent, or virus-like, and it can be sent to many people very quickly without fact, and with much fiction, which these two emails could have in them both. It doesn't have a lot of validity it can get out of the company very quickly, and start to harm the company's market view. I think that it is very indefensible, I don't think that people can lay out enough in an email, even if it were true, to actually give the side, so that whatever is in there is so totally one sided, it's kind of like a newspaper article that isn't founded on fact. It's too easily read, and too easily influenceable.