Managing Workplace Romance; A Headache for Human Resource Leaders

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Abstract. With the flux of women into workplace, having positive and negative outcomes managing workplace romance becomes more important. Not only are more women than ever before in the labor force working alongside men, but the average number of hours spent at work has also increased since the 1980s (Kaufman & Hotchkiss, 2003). Traditional approaches focus on negative outcomes more and have a risk minimization approach. Setting policies to restrict or eliminate workplace romance in organization is an example. These policies will lose the potential benefits. The goal of this paper is to encourage human resource leaders to think on positive outcomes that workplace romance may have (e.g. increasing performance and job involvement). So drawing from the empirical workplace romance literature we encourage HR leaders to rely on a balanced focus on minimizing risks and maximizing rewards of workplace romances. To achieve this goal we derive a set of best-practice recommendations that HR leaders can adopt to manage risks and benefits of romantic relations in organizations.

Keywords: Workplace Romance, Sexual Harassment, Business Policy, Human Resource Management.

1. Introduction

These days most of people spend lots of their time at workplaces; meanwhile their chemistry of sexual attraction is still working. Romance in workplace is believed to have increased as a result of the influx of women into the labor force. In 1950, less than 30 percent of the 64 million labor force participants in the United States were women. As of 2003, women composed 46.6 percent of the labor force (Kaufman & Hotchkiss, 2003). Not only are more women than ever before in the labor force working alongside men, but the average number of hours spent at work has also increased since the 1980s (Kaufman & Hotchkiss, 2003). The combination of a gender-mixed workforce and time spent at the workplace has the effect of conjuring up human emotions that often give birth to romance between co-workers and between subordinates and their supervisors.

In a 2005 SHRM poll (Parks 2006) 40 percent of employees acknowledged being involved in a workplace romance, yet only 12 percent of organizations have a formal or written workplace romance policy (Shellenbarger 2004; Taub 2002); yet in both 2001 and 2005 fewer than 15 percent of employers had a policy dealing with romance or sexual relationships in the workplace (Parks 2006). Although 80 percent of American employees had been involved in or knew of a workplace romance, as late as 2003 88 percent of companies surveyed had no workplace romance policy (Shellenbarger 2004). The organization—most likely through the office of human resources—should develop policies and processes for managing and dealing with workplace romances. But beyond a legal policies HR leaders should think more broadly and strategically about managing workplace romances.

2. Literature Review

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Workplace romance is defined as a mutually desired relationship that includes physical attraction between two members of the same organization (Quinn, 1977; Foley and Powell 1999; Pierce, 1998). Workplace romance is consensual and mutually welcomed (Clarke 2006). Workplace romances are characterized by desiring to be with the other person and feelings of emotional and physical attraction, which may lead to a sharing of personal information, mutual caring and respect, and quite likely sexual behavior such as touching, kissing and hugging, and sexual intercourse (Pierce et al, 1996). Working together allows people to get to know each other; and as familiarity grows, workplace romances may be more likely to occur. These relationships may form between peer co-workers, supervisors, subordinates, or even with company clients (Rabin-Margaloith 2006).

2.1. Types of Workplace romance

Based on motive: Three of the most common types of workplace romances are a companionate romance, a fling, and a utilitarian romance, each of which occur with approximately equal frequency (Dillard et al., 1994). A companionate romance is when each partner has a sincere love motive, a fling is when each partner has an ego motive, and a utilitarian romance is when a lower-rank employee has a job related motive and a higher-rank employee has an ego motive (Dillard et al., 1994; Powell & Foley, 1998).

Based on level: In another view we can examine three categories of workplace romance: employee peer to- peer workplace romance, supervisor and subordinate workplace romance, and workplace romance when one or both employees are married. Workplace romance between peers, that is employees who work in similar positions in terms of the organizational hierarchy. Workplace romance between peers, that is employees who work in similar positions in terms of the organizational hierarchy. These affiliations result from the fact that many individuals spend more time in the workplace than in any other setting (Shellenbarger 2004; Powell and Foley 1998). hierarchical romance relationships are romances involving individuals at different levels in hierarchical position–or when one of the employees is a manager or executive. If one or both of the employees are married, the negative outcomes to the individuals involved and the organization can be further increased (Schwartz and Storm 2000).

2.2. Outcomes of workplace romances

Outcomes of workplace romance depend on the level and type of it. Many cases in literature have mentioned positive and negative outcomes. Workplace romance has many risks which must be considered when deciding about what to do. Sometimes it has rewards for the organization.

Positive outcomes:

Sincere Long-Term Relationships: Contrary to popular belief, most workplace romances are sincere, love-motivated, long-term companionate or passionate relationships as opposed to shortlived flings or job-motivated utilitarian relationships (Dillard, Hale, & Segrin, 1994).

Enhanced Job Performance: To the contrary, the Studies indicate that participating in a workplace romance (a) can increase or decrease one's job performance (Quinn, 1977), (b) is not associated with one's job performance (Dillard & Broetzmann, 1989; Pierce & Aguinis, 2003) or does not lead to performance decrements (Dillard, 1987; Dillard et al., 1994), and (c) is positively associated with one's job performance (Pierce, 1998).

Increased Job Satisfaction: research indicates that participating in a satisfying workplace romance is positively associated with one's overall job satisfaction (Pierce & Aguinis, 2003)

Increased Job Involvement and Organizational Commitment: Love-motivated workplace romances are positively associated with female participants' levels of job involvement (Dillard, 1987) and there is a small positive association between participating in a workplace romance and one's level of organizational commitment (Pierce & Aguinis, 2003).

Negative outcomes:

Sexual Harassment: Workplace romances are not illegal and not typically the target of litigation (Clarke, 2006; Schultz, 2003).

Unethical Relationships: the most problematic unethical relationships are either extramarital or direct-reporting supervisor subordinate romances in which sex and power can be traded.

Unfair Interventions: When management intervenes in a workplace romance, it risks being accused of unfair treatment.

Disruptive Dissolutions: Another risk for organizations occurs when they culminate in breakups at work that are disruptive to participants' and co-workers' job performance (Powell, 2001).

2.3. Legal-centric vs. Organizationally Sensible approach

Considering that outcomes range from positive long-term relationships to sexually harassing behavior, the goal of this article is to encourage human resource (HR) leaders to think more broadly and strategically about managing workplace romances. In legal centric approach to manage workplace romance, leaders focus on risk minimization, in other words they try to minimize the cost. But in organizationally sensible approach, leaders should focus on both risk minimization and reward maximization. To achieve these outcomes, we recommend that HR leaders embed the legal-centric management approach within a broader and more strategic organizationally sensible approach that both minimizes risks (costs) and maximizes rewards (benefits) of workplace romances.

3. Managing Workplace Romance

The sensible and pragmatic view must be that workplace romances cannot be effectively prohibited, but the resultant behavior can be managed through policy and managerial training legal-centric approach is its opportunity lost by ignoring benefits of workplace romance. On the flip side, the advantage of an organizationally sensible approach is that it would subsume yet go beyond minimizing the legal risks of workplace romance. Strict rules requiring zero tolerance and mandatory termination likely result in employees' opting for secrecy or a ―don't tell ‖ approach, which likely results in management eventually dealing with the more serious and complex issues related to negative outcomes of workplace romances that have ended badly (Schaefer, Tudor, and Thomas 2001). Any policy or method that restricts workplace romance is losing the positive outcomes it may have, so leaders should develop approaches that are organizationally sensible to have both cost minimization and benefit maximization.

In literature there are some recommendations an organization may use to manage workplace romance. Love or dating contract is a good example this contract is a legal document in which the organization and the employees involved acknowledge the romance. Using legal methods like this limits or even eliminate organization's liability but misses the positive outcomes that workplace romance may have. . Previous recommendations for managing workplace romances do not provide a balanced focus on minimizing risks and maximizing. So based on the scientific evidence accumulated from workplace romance studies we derive a set of best-practice recommendations that HR leaders can adopt to manage workplace Romances.

3.1. Written Ethics Code and Corporate Culture

In this instance, top management frowns upon such behavior and deems it extremely unprofessional. Those with intentions of climbing the corporate ladder will not become involved in an office romance and will likewise incorporate the culture and voice such ideals throughout the firm so that this cultural value is further disseminated. It is usually in this culture where the most discretion is exercised when a romance is pursued (Wilson et al., 2003)

Because organizations differ with respect to their values and codes of ethical conduct, what one organization considers an appropriate romance may be considered inappropriate in another. To communicate an organization's values and ethics code to employees, a written workplace romance policy should at minimum state and justify the following: (a) types of romances that are permitted or encouraged (b) types of romances that are discouraged (c) types of romances that are prohibited and (d) actions management will take if employees violate any of the terms in the policy.

Once top management adopts a written workplace romance policy, organizations should evaluate the extent to which employees comply with stipulations in the policy as part of a performance management system that entails a "continuous process of identifying, measuring, and developing the performance of individuals and teams and aligning performance with the strategic goals of the organization" (Aguinis, 2009, p. 2).

3.2. Performance outcomes and intervention

If an employee's performance is in any way affected, regardless of whether it was due to the romance, the performance review will reflect the change in performance. If management frowns upon office romance and is aware of the romance, the employer may be encouraged to "punish" the employee by means of performance reviews. There are also positive performance outcomes. This generally occurs when one employee is trying to gain the respect and affection of the other employee and in the initial stage of a relationship. We recommend that HR leaders manage workplace romances as part of an organization wide performance management system.

Quinn (1977) described three general kinds of interventions that organizations make in response to a specific organizational Romance: no action at all, punitive action (e.g. reprimand, warning, transfer, termination), and positive action (e.g. open discussion, counseling). The most frequent response was no action, involving either a decision to ignore the romance, a belief that whatever problem the romance presented would resolve itself, or an avoidance of the risk associated with talking action.

To minimize the risk of unfair management interventions, we recommend that organizations only intervene in workplace romances when they cause declines in participants' job performance or cause work disruption. Furthermore, when management intervenes, their action(s) should be tied directly to romance participants' job performance and the functioning of their workgroup (Brown & Allgeier, 1995).

3.3. Training managers and supervisors regarding workplace romances

Most HR professionals lack training on how to manage workplace romances (SHRM, 1998, 2002). HR leaders should be trained on how to counsel employees who participate in workplace romances. HR professionals often take no action in response to workplace romances (Pierce et al., 1996). According to Karl and Sutton's (2000) findings, employees perceive having managers counsel romance participants as a more fair intervention than no action, verbal reprimand, written warning, transfer, or termination.

Moreover, HR leaders should be trained on how to manage risks and rewards of workplace romance as part of a performance management system (Aguinis, 2009). Part of this training could entail instructing HR professionals on how to develop, administer, and interpret results of surveys that measure employees' levels of job satisfaction, job involvement, organizational commitment, and job performance to confirm that these factors are positively associated with their participation.

Finally, HR leaders should be trained on how to respond to harassment complaints that stem from a prior romance between the alleged harasser and complainant. HR leaders should thus be trained to avoid the biasing effects of a prior romance and instead focus on the alleged harassing conduct. Moreover, HR professionals should inform female employees of the potential risks involved in a workplace romance.

4. Conclusion

We encourage HR leaders to think more broadly and strategically about managing workplace romances. By being overly concerned about sex discrimination lawsuits, organizations have gone overboard in regulating workplace romance and, consequently, may have undermined their valuable human resources (Clarke, 2006; Rabin-Margalioth, 2006; Schaefer & Tudor, 2001; Schultz, 2003). Instead, the scientific studies conducted thus far suggest it will be best practice for HR leaders to implement the organizationally sensible guidelines for managing workplace romances.

The disadvantage of the legal-centric approach is its opportunity lost by ignoring benefits of workplace romance. So in this article we remind HR leaders of the benefits that workplace romance may have and presented recommendations to both prevent costs and risks of workplace romance and benefit from the rewards that may result from romances at workplace.

In closing, HR leaders should be at the heart of managing workplace romances by taking ownership of and accountability for the challenging task of managing risks and rewards of workplace romances. HR leaders need to shift their role from operational executor to credible activist (Grossman, 2007). By being credible activists, they would gain the respect, admiration, and power needed to manage workplace romances in an organizationally sensible manner.

5. Acknowledgements

6. References

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