

A House Divided – When Married Co-Workers Get Divorced



Attitudes towards workplace romantic relationships have changed dramatically over the past couple of decades. While workplace romantic relationships long existed they were frequently held in secret and once discovered the situation was often resolved with one of the co-workers transferred or dismissed.

A healthy personal relationship between co-workers may not be a bad thing for your organization as often it is connected to a happier and healthier employee. However, when the relationship turns sour another story often emerges.

Impact of Failed Workplace Marriages

According to Stats Canada the divorce rate in Canada fluctuates at around 40%, a number that has remained fairly steady for some time. Given these statistics it is certainly expected that a number of your employees will experience the end of a marriage while in your employ. Each couple is different and their reactions to the dissolution of their marriage can take many forms. Common reactions to a divorce will include sadness and anger while others will experience relief and even, on a rare occasion, happiness. If you are lucky your divorcing employees may have an amicable divorce and maintain their performance in the workplace; 80% of Canadian divorce cases are uncontested and most are legally resolved within 6 months.

Generally, however, in most cases the end of a marriage will have a negative impact on your employee's workplace performance, at least for a brief period of time. However, when this situation involves two co-workers in the same place of employment this may have a tangible impact in the workplace. Not only may the performance of each employee be impacted but co-workers may experience divided loyalties which can have a broader impact on workplace productivity.

Having a plan to support employees going through divorce can be generally important. When the situation arises where your organization has married employees involved in an acrimonious divorce it is even more important that you are prepared to monitor and manage the situation.

Taking Steps to Manage Co-Worker Divorce

Act Quickly For Risk management: The first thing to keep in mind when faced with divorcing employees is that if your organization has good policies and procedures

already in place you should draw upon these to address any potential issues. Do not diminish the situation because the couple is divorcing and you want to cut them slack. Yes, you want to support them but you also need to follow your existing policies.

Review your policies: Be prepared to apply your policies for workplace conduct, harassment, performance and progressive discipline as required. If you do not have these policies in place then you need to pull them together quickly.

Monitor employee behaviours: It can be crucial to step up and actively monitor and then act if you suspect any conduct that could cause concern. Harassment or bullying behaviours should be addressed immediately. Although not common it is possible that an employee may make false allegations about a spouse. These allegations could include workplace behaviours or behaviours outside the workplace. Before acting investigate