

Help Your Managers Respond to Unwanted Flirting in the Workplace



Flirting in the workplace can be fun and flattering and some employees enjoy the attention of a flirting co-worker. With multiple generations and people of diverse cultural backgrounds and different personal styles working side-by-side it can be difficult to tell when flirting is really flirting or when it is a personal or cultural style. What one person calls flirting another person may consider a friendly, personal exchange. The Urban dictionary even includes in its definition that flirting is difficult to define because of personal and cultural differences

It would be impractical and not necessarily even smart to try to ban flirting or even generally ban workplace relationships. According to many surveys, including a 2013 Career-Builder survey, 40% of workers report that they have had personal romantic relationships with a co-worker, with 29% of those leading to a marriage.

Sometimes, however, the flirtatious actions of one employee make another employee uncomfortable or otherwise disrupt the workplace. When this is brought to the attention of HR it is important to take a measured and balanced approach to addressing the situation.

Flirting With the Manager

If a third party has raised the concern with respect to two consenting co-workers it is usually the best course of action to tell the third party meddler that the personal relationships of co-workers are private.

However, if the flirting appears to be happening between an employee and a manager HR may need to look further at the situation. Perceptions with regards to senior leaders and personal relationships with employees can be damaging to the organization. While flirting in and of itself may not be inappropriate conduct, if it involves an employee and a supervisor or manager it could require intervention. If it appears there is an employee flirting with a manager talk to the manager to ensure you stay ahead of the situation.

6 Responses For Managers to The Unwanted Flirting of an Employee

If the manager does agree or if it appears there is reason for concern about the flirtatious behaviours of an employee offer the manager these techniques to shut down the situation.

- **Become Unavailable for Alone Time:** The manager does not need to avoid the employee and should be careful not to cut the employee out of opportunities. However, it is rarely necessary for a manager to be alone with an employee. Conversations between the manager and employee can continue but need to be limited in public spaces and in combination with text, email or phone. This may be more difficult for a direct supervisor who may be more frequently in a position to talk to an employee one-on-one. The supervisor may continue to have individual conversations but these could be held in view of other people.

If conversations are held in a private office the door can remain open and it is further good advice to ensure there is distance or an object such as a desk or chair between the parties.

- **Stick to Working Hours:** Although many workplaces have embraced flexible working hours a rule of thumb for a supervisor or manager who is trying to avoid sending the wrong message to a flirting employee is to keep most communications and all meetings to standard working hours. This means not responding to the flirtatious employee's 11:00 pm call or 7:00 am text unless the situation is truly an emergency. This helps maintain the perspective that the relationship is a workplace based one and not an after hours relationship.
- **Change the Focus Of The Conversation:** Sometimes managers are flattered by attention of a younger employee and will engage in banter that may be interpreted as an expression of a personal interest. Talking about youthful or past adventures and indiscretions and listening to stories of the employee's adventures on the weekend can send the wrong message. Showing an interest in employee's lives can be a positive thing but when it sends a mixed message it is time to re-think the conversation. Suggest the manager re-focus the conversations away from personal experiences or activities to discuss neutral topics such as trends in the industry, general business, the environment or even the weather when not discussing work. The manager can even mention plans with his/her family or significant other. However, remind the manager or supervisor not to share any information about problems in his/her personal relationships or ask the employee about his/her personal relationships.
- **Expand the Parties in the Conversation:** Determine if a third party can be added to the dynamics of the situation. That third party could be another employee, an intern, an assistant, a mentor and so on. If the employee is working on a project that requires the supervisor or manager's input identify who else may be brought into the project to be part of the ongoing conversations. Changing the dynamic can change the opportunities for inappropriate behaviours.
- **Re-direct Inappropriate Behaviours:** When the manager is in a situation where the employee is engaged in behaviours that could be interpreted as flirting, such as inappropriate conversations or questions, the Manager should re-direct the conversation back to work or neutral topics. Saying 'lets stick to business we have a lot to do' can begin to change the conversation. If the flirting employee begins touching the manager or supervisor the manager should move away from the employee to send a signal that the touching is unwanted.
- **The Direct Conversation:** If other methods are not producing the desired results the manager or supervisor may need to have a direct, but not accusatory conversation with the employee. It is important that HR should be in the loop, but not necessary in the conversation at this point. The employee should not feel he/she is being disciplined only being offered professional feedback from a manager. The manager or supervisor could say: "I am not sure if you are aware but sometimes your actions or conversations could be taken as too personal for the workplace and may be interpreted as being inappropriate. As your supervisor/manager I wanted to share this information so you can avoid damaging your career in the future'.

We prefaced this article by saying that it is not uncommon in today's workplace that seemingly flirtatious behaviours are not always intended as such. Before taking action consider if there are ways to open up conversations about personal styles, generation, and cultural differences in behaviours within the organization. Assessments or activities such as a light-hearted team personality assessments or workplace culture exercises can open the door to more awareness and help everyone further develop their emotional intelligence skills.