

LSU Office of the Ombudsperson

Consensual Relationships in the Workplace: Is It Worth the Risk?

The Ombuds Office is a confidential, neutral, informal and independent office. It is a safe place where faculty, staff, and students can speak honestly about their situation, seek guidance on LSU policies, and seek support in resolving conflicts. A recurring issue for the Ombuds Office involves the unfavorable consequences of consensual relationships in the workplace. The Ombuds Office would like to provide some cautionary guidance to anyone considering blending their personal and professional lives. The question to ask yourself is: ***Is it worth the risk?***

Consensual relationships cover the spectrum from just friends to just sex to dating to living together to marriage. One's personal life is a private matter, not typically discussed in any significant detail in the workplace. Each person sets their own personal boundary, allowing as much, or as little, information about their private life into the workplace. This personal boundary may be fluid and change with different people. However, when you decide to discuss a very personal matter with a coworker, you make the choice to cross a professional boundary and allow that coworker into your personal life.

When coworkers become best friends, spending time together outside of work and introducing spouses and significant others, the result is blended professional and personal boundaries between two people who are now in a perceived biased work relationship. This will be further complicated, if one of the coworkers is promoted over the other coworker. If the two people are able to maintain a purely professional relationship while at work, then they may not have an issue. However, their colleagues may have cause for concern. Others in the department who are fully aware of the close relationship may perceive actions by the supervisor as favoritism. Frustrations and resentments set-in. Work may be disrupted. This is a scenario where the two people with the consensual relationship are just friends.

What if the friendship ends? What if the friendship develops into occasional sex? What if the relationship becomes love . . . and then ends? What if one wants to end the relationship, but the other wants to try to work it out? What if one of the people involved is an undergraduate student worker? What if the two people are a graduate student and their faculty advisor? What if the two people are a faculty member and an administrator? What if it's two faculty members from different departments, but in the same college? What if it's two faculty members from different colleges? The combination of possibilities goes on.

The risk of consensual relationships in the workplace is an inverse correlation: the shorter the line connecting the professional roles in the workplace, the greater the risk that the personal relationship will harm the careers of the people involved. If the personal relationship ends, and at least one of the people involved is unhappy it ended, there will be consequences beyond your control. Examples of possible consequences to all people involved include, but are not limited to: discriminatory impact, allegations of sexual harassment, question of consent vs. coercion if one of the people has a position of authority or perception of power, conflict of interest, retaliation, bias, favoritism, low department morale, poor judgment or loss of trust, loss of mutual respect, reduction in job performance, legitimate unsatisfactory evaluations are questioned, and loss of credibility. At the very least, and even if not in violation of any particular rule or policy, your judgment as a professional may be criticized if you make the choice to enter into a personal relationship in the workplace and that personal relationship disrupts the department.

Before you decide to blend the boundaries between your professional and personal lives, carefully consider the potential impact of the relationship on your work, your work environment, and your long-term career paths. Is it worth the risk? If you decide to proceed, can you mitigate the risk by changing departments or changing faculty advisors? The greater the distance between the professional roles of the people involved in a personal relationship, the lower the risk of harm to their careers.