

PROBLEM SOLVING: OPTICS

When office affair blooms, no need to reach for DDT

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Dear Susan,

I am a professional in a large accounting firm, where it has become obvious to many of us that two members of our group are having an affair. They're experienced professionals who are quite discreet, but there's still talk in the office, much of which is disapproving. The man is now separated from his wife and in the process of divorce - and it shows. As group leader, I wonder if I should say something to them or to the group. What's your view?

- *Squirming*

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Dear Squirming,

These are two consenting adults. Unless one reports to the other, everyone should calm down, clam up, and try to mind their own business. If you say anything at all, it should be a few words of quiet support to the fellow under strain - and an offer of time off if he thinks this might help. The woman involved might benefit from the same, along with some reassurance that she will not be shown the door.

Feeling vulnerable may be an issue because, until recently, women smitten at work routinely took the fall.

Research by Charles Pierce, a management professor at the University of Memphis, shows that women involved in workplace romances often ended up leaving their jobs, although for a long time no one knew if a pink slip was the new scarlet letter, or if they left for other reasons.

"The evidence now is that it's both rank and gender," said the amiable young professor, who calls himself Chuck. He pointed out several studies from the eighties and nineties showing that the least essential person was usually history after a workplace relationship, having been fired, transferred or departing voluntarily.

Why people really leave their jobs is often a mystery, but in these cases there can be not-so-subtle pressure from colleagues and superiors to keep amorous ties - with their hints of

favouritism and harassment - from infusing office politics. That's the common assumption, but it hides another factor: the tendency for women to meet their mates in the office, then rejig their careers when children appear.

Either way, women are disproportionately affected, as they're often more junior than their partners, and their careers are deemed expendable.

Love in the new millennium, however, means equal censure for all. When former Boeing chief executive officer Harry Stonecipher's discreet affections for a colleague were uncovered, or the dalliances of David Colby, the chief financial officer for big U.S. health insurer WellSpring, both got the axe. So did Suzy Wetlaufer, the highly accomplished, vivacious editor of the Harvard Business Review, now known as Mrs. Jack Welch. Male or female, being cut loose was a message that the top dog should know better.

Even when peers don't report to each other, adultery provokes the most negative scuttlebutt. Both sexes weigh in, but women are harshest in their judgment of other women - who are viewed as using romance as a quick route to the top, according to studies of employed MBA students.

Finger-wagging aside, surveys on office love affairs reveal they're incredibly common, with about 10 million consensual romances developing between co-workers each year in the U.S. That's the equivalent of the population of a small European nation meeting at the photocopier, year after year.

In fact, studies designed to probe the private lives of executives, and managers by such august groups as the Society of Human Resource Management and the U.S. Bureau of National Affairs simply document the obvious: Now that we're spending most of our time at the office, that's the place to meet prospects, with a third of all romances starting out in the workplace.

Hardly boding ill for all concerned, half of the romantic relationships that begin at work last, resulting in marriage or a long term relationship, while only 5 per cent provoke formal complaints.

Let's face it: offices are "natural theatres" for social and sexual interaction, a phrase coined by sociologist Arlie Hochschild. As such, there's great potential for drama, but also for applause.

If the new couple has even a chance to be happy, the team should back off and just let these folks be.

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*, which hits bookstores Feb. 26.*

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