

Dating, Flirting, and Sexual Advances

What if I want to ask a co-worker out?

Some companies have very specific rules against co-workers dating, and for good reason. If you work in the same department or location, things can get sticky. They don't want a romantic relationship to affect your work or the workplace. Check out your company's specifics before you pop the question.

There is no law that says you can't date co-workers (although some folks who have been through a work-turned-personal relationship would tell you that there should be). Think about it. How would you feel if you had to go to work tomorrow with all your exes? Sounds like loads of fun, huh? So, weigh the pros and cons carefully before you act.

What if a manager asks me out?

No question, it's flattering. And no question, it can make you feel special. But dating a manager can be problematic. Consider saying something like, "Thanks, but I am uncomfortable because you're a manager and we work together. Let's just keep our relationship a working one."

Talk to another manager if the manager persists or retaliates against you for declining. Both are illegal under federal law.

What if I want to ask a boss out?

Even if you think your boss is the same way you do, think twice before you pop the dating question. Romantic relationships between a manager and an employee can be perceived as inappropriate and can lead to complaints of sexual harassment.

How do I stop a co-worker I was dating from sharing intimate details about us?

This is one of the ways things can get messy when co-workers date. It's tough to get a work-turned-personal relationship focused back on work and professionalism. Consider saying something like, "Can we please treat each other with respect at work? I'm not sharing anything about you or us with others, and I'd appreciate it if you did the same."

If it was an amicable parting, this approach should be effective. If you had a hurtful breakup, this approach may yield additional hurt and anger. Consider addressing the anger by saying something like, "I understand that you are angry about our breakup, but we need to focus on work here. I'd appreciate it if you didn't talk about me — or us — to anyone at work."

What if a co-worker tells me to stop asking them out?

Offending Others

I don't mean to offend anyone, so what's the big deal?

If you're thinking that it's difficult to know how to behave at work, you're right — sort of. It's easy to blow this out of proportion, though, and say that you're not allowed to be yourself or that the world has gone too PC. But political correctness at work is really just a matter of respecting the people around you.

The way you act and what you say when you are out with a group of friends on a Saturday night may be different from how you act and what you say while you're at work. You can be yourself in both environments, just a different part of yourself.

It's not the intention that matters; it's the impact on the other person. *Think* about what you say and *do before* you say or do it. Building a culture of respect begins with everyone doing their part.

What if a co-worker tells me I've offended him or her?

A genuine "I'm sorry" will hopefully put the incident in the past. Yes, it may be a little embarrassing for you, but consider the courage it took your co-worker to tell you.

Consider yourself lucky and don't do it again. Negative or offensive comments among co-workers only make it more difficult to work. And, keep in mind that a pattern of offensive comments could lead to serious consequences, including loss of employment and even legal action.

How can I have any fun at work if I have to be politically correct all the time?

Actually, you can — and should — have fun while you work. We all spend too much time at work not to enjoy it. However, that fun shouldn't be at the expense of someone else.

Consider the feelings of your co-workers because it's the right thing to do. Making fun of people or sexually charging the workplace with your comments, suggestions, and behaviors is inappropriate. Try having fun by enjoying your job and the people you work with.

What if a co-worker is always looking at my body?

What do you say? “Hey, get your eyes off my body”? Maybe some of us could say that, but most of us couldn’t. However, you can say it in a different way — and, yes, you have every right to say it. Regardless of the words you choose, it’s going to be uncomfortable, but not as uncomfortable as their unwelcome gawking, right?

So, walk away, think about what you want to say, take a deep breath and then go back and say it. Try saying something like, “I’m really uncomfortable with the way you seem to be looking at my body when we’re talking.” If the offending co-worker plays innocent, follow up with something like, “Well, you may not be aware of it, but it really bothers me, so could you keep your eyes on my eyes when we talk?”

Some of you may be thinking, “Right. I would never be able to say something like that to one of my co-workers.” That’s okay. If the idea intimidates you or you can’t muster enough courage to talk face to face with her or him, talk to a manager. But do something about it. You may be dealing with a co-worker who doesn’t even know he’s doing it. Or you may be dealing with someone who knows exactly what he’s doing. Either way, it’s not going to stop on its own.

And, if you notice a co-worker behaving that way with another co-worker? Speak up. Be an upstander. Report it to a manager. If it doesn’t stop or you don’t feel comfortable speaking with your co-worker. The recipient of the gawking will thank you. And, who knows, the gawking co-worker may do well.

What if my boss is always looking at my body?

If your boss is looking at you in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable or unsafe, you do not need to put up with it. It’s understandable that you may not want to confront your boss yourself, but you need to tell somebody. So, go to another manager or go to someone in Human Resources and let that person help you deal with the problem.

Offensive Cartoons, Posters, Pictures, Texts, and Emails

What if a co-worker tells me to take down my poster because it’s offensive?

Even if you’d like to tell your co-worker to get a sense of humor, the right thing to do is to take the poster down and put it up at home.

Your work area is your own space and should be comfortable. But it shouldn’t be offensive to anyone else. There’s more to you than any one poster can typify. So, if you want your work area to reflect who you are, find something that reflects one of the other many facets of you as a person.

Here are a couple of tips to help you assess what is appropriate to display in your work area:

- Ask yourself whether the humor or message is at anyone’s expense.
- Ask yourself if your freedom of expression infringes on someone else’s.

What are the other forms of hostile work environment?

Employees can also experience a hostile work environment **when the conduct comes from a third party** or **when they are not the direct target**.

- A third party like a customer, vendor, or delivery person can also create an intimidating, offensive or hostile work environment for an employee.
- Hostile work environment sexual harassment can also occur when someone is negatively impacted by sexual conduct that is not happening directly to them.

What is the reasonable person standard?

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and courts use a “reasonable person” standard to determine whether a hostile work environment exists. Essentially, the court asks, “Would a reasonable person find this conduct severe or pervasive enough to create a hostile or intimidating work environment?”

Does conduct have to be sexual in nature to be illegal sexual harassment?

No. Derogatory and insulting behaviors based on gender are also illegal.

In addition to the behaviors that are sexual in nature, conduct that is not based on sexual desire can also create a hostile work environment. Harassment and discrimination based on gender, sexual orientation, and marital status, for example, are also illegal. For additional protections particular to your municipality talk to your manager or HR.

Sexual Harassment Complaints and Reporting

Am I responsible if I just witness sexual misconduct, but I'm not part of it?

As a fellow human being and a respectful co-worker, you hold some responsibility for trying to stop harassment in the workplace. You're not obligated to step into the middle of it yourself, unless you're comfortable doing so, but being an upstander instead of a bystander can be a powerful vehicle for change.

There are three ways you can be an upstander, instead of a bystander who does nothing:

- 1) Filter your words and actions so that your conduct is professional and respectful at work. In other words, be an example.
- 2) Speak up and address inappropriate conduct or sexual harassment when you witness it or hear it.
- 3) Support colleagues if they feel uncomfortable or harassed, by encouraging them to speak up to the person doing the harassing, their manager, or HR.

What should I do when I am offended by something going on?

It takes courage to speak up, and it's often tough to do in the moment. So, don't worry about being quick on your feet. In fact, don't worry about saying anything then and there. If you need to, just walk away. Then think about what you want to say and go back and say it. When you speak up, you become part of the solution.

What if I witness something inappropriate toward a co-worker?

Say something and become an upstander instead of a bystander. Approach the co-worker whose conduct is offensive in a private setting. Speak in a calm and conversational tone. Say something like, "Hey, I wanted to talk to you for a minute about something I saw (or heard). Do you realize that sometimes your comments are offensive?" or "Do you realize that the way you look at her bothers her?"

Keep it non-threatening and approach your co-worker as you would want someone to approach you. Regardless of how your co-worker reacts, you can be assured that you did your part.

What can I expect when I forward to report sexual harassment?

Individual complaints typically state that you should expect the following:

- Your complaint will be taken seriously, and you will be listened to without judgment.
- A prompt and thorough investigation.
- Limited confidentiality meaning only the people involved in the investigation will have knowledge and awareness of the complaint.
- Protection from any sort of retaliation.
- The complaint will be fully documented.
- Follow-up and action taken.

What if I'm threatened about "squealing"?

Federal and many state laws protect employees who file a discrimination or harassment complaint — or who cooperate in an investigation — from retaliation of any kind. A harasser or manager who retaliates against a harassment complainant or someone cooperating with a harassment investigation is breaking the law.

The laws also protect employees from retaliation when they complain — either internally or to an outside agency like the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) — about workplace discrimination or harassment.