

DAYTIME DRAMA:

# LOVE IN THE OFFICE

By GERALDINE  
ROMANO SPRUELL

FOUR  
MONTHS  
OF SLAVING OVER  
THE BANK'S BIGGEST  
PROJECT AND I'M DREADING  
ITS END!

I KNOW, MEL. BU  
I'LL TELL YOU THIS -  
WE CAN TURN IN  
OUR FINAL REPORT,  
BUT WE CAN'T TURN  
OUR BACKS ON THE  
WAY WE FEEL  
ABOUT EACH OTHER



**N**OW THAT LOVE'S FOUND ITS WAY INTO THE EXECUTIVE SUITE,  
THE OLD RULES ON OFFICE ROMANCE WILL NOT WORK.

My wife  
She puts me on hold  
My wife  
Makes people do as they're told  
They type her letters  
They read her mail  
Order her burgers  
Order her snails  
Replace her pencils  
And place her calls  
Run off her memos  
They do it all, because  
She's an executive  
That "girl" is an executive  
My wife's an executive  
And she's got her own key to the ladies' room.

—Songwriter Unknown

The office has changed. No longer is it the exclusive domain of high-level male executives flanked by females with lukewarm ambitions. It is an electrified setting for goal achievement by powerful professionals of both sexes. As a result, organizations face an old but altered challenge: how best to deal with the sparks generated by men and women working together.

The challenge of dealing with sexual attraction in the office is different today and demands different tactics. Yet management commonly abides by an outdated rule: Ignore it and it will go away. Lester Talbot, director of human resource operations at The Penn Mutual Life Insurance Company, believes men have tried to keep organizations sterile and without emotion, which, they fear, will erode the organization. "Sexual attraction is a highly emotional issue, so they try to ignore it and hope it goes away."

But the fact is that sexual attraction incidents are increasing, they are getting more serious, and they will not simply fade from the organizational scene.

## The new office and its new sex

Women are climbing a wider and steadier ladder to success today. More are striving for and attaining top management positions—positions to which they bring advanced degrees and a wealth of valuable experience. Talbot points out that organizations are competing fiercely

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for these women and purposefully studying what makes them stay. This is evidenced by the once nonexistent and now taken for granted pregnancy benefits.

The soaring growth of day care centers and government attention to their operation, plus endless reports on the super-woman tell us that women are committed to balancing personal lives and careers. Fewer are choosing to stay home, or to go home once their babies are born. This increasing population of women in management poses new problems.

"Powerful women in the work force is a new thing for men and women to deal with," says organization development consultant Kaleel Jamison. "It's not what they were brought up to expect." Many organizations, she says, expect women to leave their femininity in the parking lot when they enter the office. But this cannot and should not be done.

Jamison's partner, organization development consultant Frederick Miller, adds, "Organizations want women to be men. But by requiring women to be men, you limit the productivity of the organization."

What happens when powerful women are *women* and powerful men are *men*, and they work side by side?

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"Sexual attraction is inevitable," says Chester Wright, chief of the work force effectiveness and development division for the U.S. Office of Personnel Management—Atlanta Region. "The whole excitement of men and women sharing a high-power work environment and working together to solve problems is a stimulus."

Horn and Horn, in their 1982 publication *Sex in the Office*, discussed the psychological and physical incentives to the development of office romance. "Practically every emotion you can name—from despair to exultation—is expressed routinely in offices and corridors. If you are working on a risky venture with an attractive partner, your adrenalin level is high. You feel good, nervous, excited. The sense of high risk can be easily translated into sexual attraction for your

partner." Succeed or fail, they conclude, falling into one another's arms seems right and natural.

Other characteristics of the new office besides increased women in management stimulate sexual attraction. Barbara Riddle, an advertising professional in Washington, D.C., tells how she fell in love with a co-worker whom she eventually married.

"Richard and I had been working together for about six months when a health club opened nearby. The agency bought a corporate membership and the two of us started to go. We went together at lunchtime, became good friends and, two months later, the friendship blossomed into love."

Corporate club memberships, chartered excursions, even new office Christmas parties—they're bigger and fancier, and fewer spouses attend—all increase the likelihood of co-workers falling in love.

## Why attraction must be addressed

Jamison asserts that in the future, even more women will work on even more stimulating projects with men, and we must learn how to deal with it now. "Sex-

ual attraction can't be stopped and it can enhance the organization. It should be managed so it has a positive, not negative, effect on the organization and its people."

"It wouldn't be disruptive as often if managers would stop burying their heads in the sand," says Talbot. "If they would be open about sexual attraction and would educate employees about it, the people attracted would feel less guilty and wouldn't feel the need to be sneaky. That is what's disruptive."

It is the rare, but not unheard of, sexual attraction case that attracts media attention. Public relations professional F. Charles Graves, partner and executive vice president of Michael Klepper Associates, advises management to "acknowledge sexual attraction and find ways to deal with it ahead of time. When it strikes, if it strikes big and you're un-

prepared, it can turn into a public relations problem. It can be disruptive to the company and its image in the community, especially if the company is the main employer in the community."

### Can organizations benefit from sexual attraction?

In "The Sexual Side of Enterprise," Jeanne Bosson Driscoll and Rosemary A. Bova reported the following reasons why organizations commonly disfavor attraction:

- Personal distractions interfere with productivity.
- People may avoid working together because of fear of attraction.
- Sexual relationships have power implications within the organization.
- Promotions may be lost or gained through sexual favoritism.

In the past, wrote Driscoll and Bova, organizations that did not ignore relationships frequently dealt with them by terminating the employment of the women involved, who usually occupied lower-status positions. This practice may not be in the organization's best interest because, many times, large sums have been spent on developing and training both employees.<sup>1</sup>

causes happiness and creates energy. If the energy is channeled properly, it will flow into everything the employees do. It will flow into the memos they're writing, into the joint venture they're working on. It will have a positive, energizing effect on the organization."

Jamison acknowledges that the level of the relationship and the conditions surrounding it determine how deeply involved two employees can become without doing harm to themselves and to their organization. She developed a touch spectrum (its originator is not known) that combines touch and words appropriate for each level of a relationship:

- *Step 1: Acceptance*—marked by a handshake.
- *Step 2: Caring*—marked by assisting gestures, such as helping someone with a heavy package.
- *Step 3: Trust*—includes casual, accidental touches that are not perceived as sexual in motive and do not cause embarrassment.
- *Step 4: Affection*—includes friendly gestures, such as an arm around someone's shoulder, hugs and kisses on the cheek—all without sexual intent.
- *Step 5: Eroticism* and *Step 6: Genitality*—touches at these stages are explicitly sexual in nature.

the relationship reports to the other;—a relationship involving one or two married people.

Taboo relationships cause disruption in the organization, says Jamison. There must be appropriate public behavior and the relationship must not be taboo in order for it to reach genitality and still be enhancing to the organization.

"When sexual tension starts interfering with our work—when we start getting preoccupied with whether or not we should go to bed with someone—it's disruptive," says Jamison. "But it isn't always disruptive. The attraction is okay, as long as it leads to more productive work."

Co-workers outside of the relationship may feel differently, whether the relationship affects their work or not. Mere interest or justified anxiety commonly cause them to gossip, pass judgment or fear for their job security. But some outsiders remain uninvolved if they determine that the relationship is none of their business or will have no negative impact on their work.

Lynn Walker, an account executive for a major communications corporation, works within a tightly knit project group that, until recently, included three men and herself. Another female is now in the group. Speculating about the addition, Walker said, "I have to rely on the support of the others in my group—customer and product service reps—in order to do my job as account executive well. If she (the new woman) and one of the men get involved, I'll only be concerned if it has an impact on my work and my ability to achieve."

In Walker's opinion, sexual attraction can have a positive effect on a work relationship and the organization. "The stronger sense of togetherness can make a couple work stronger toward their common goals."

### Attraction in mentor relationships

Pair a male mentor with a younger, female protegee and sexual attraction is likely to result. In *Mentoring at Work*, Kathy E. Kram discusses typical roles assumed by mentors and proteges when they attempt to defuse feelings they fear will prove harmful.

Father/daughter roles most commonly are assumed in the efforts to avert sexual danger. But while the professionals may successfully play out their father/daughter parts and feel safer and

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Kaleel Jamison finds another fault with the traditional dismissal practice: It no longer is viable with more women in management positions. Women now are equally valuable and organizations cannot afford to lose them.

She also finds fault with organizational conclusions that employee attraction always spells trouble. "Sexual attraction makes people feel good about themselves. If we can position people to feel positive about themselves and their co-workers, organizations will be enhanced, productivity will be increased and employees will work better together."

Lester Talbot agrees that sexual attraction can affect the organization positively. "It's a positive, exciting emotion that

Jamison believes that in general, the highest level on the touch spectrum for productive work is affection, and companies should accept the steps leading up to and including affection as norms. They can enhance the organization.

If handled properly and if they are not taboo, some relationships can ascend the touch spectrum to genitality without negatively impacting work, says Jamison. Here's what she considers taboo:

- a relationship that includes a person with personnel functions or any other function that involves personal confidences;
- a relationship shared by co-workers in the same reporting line—they either report to the same supervisor or one in

more comfortable in their work relationship, the careers of both still suffer. The woman who colludes in playing a helpless and dependent role forfeits the opportunity to demonstrate her skills and competence. The male mentor who maintains the role of tough, invulnerable expert forfeits the opportunity to ask for help when it would be useful for needed support or information.<sup>2</sup>

The inside stories, respected references and open doors a mentor in upper management can provide are invaluable to the professional woman. Mentor/protege relationships are also important to the organization; they are an integral part of the grooming process that

sexual attraction between managers and, based on her conclusions, offered these guidelines to organizations:

- Treat the relationship as a conflict of interest.
- Advise the couple to get outside help.
- Persuade the couple that either the person least essential to the company or both have to go.
- Help the ousted executive find a new and perhaps better job.<sup>3</sup>

Jamison takes issue with the conclusion. "It says there's no way to manage sexual attraction in the office. I disagree. As an outcome of that approach, unwittingly, we perpetuate the woman bearing the brunt of the issue."

tion and related issues. Through education, Penn Mutual hopes to keep pace with a rapidly changing work environment and offer its employees concrete advice for working productively amid the new conditions.

In addition, Talbot has worked specifically at creating in his department a less rigid, more affectionate atmosphere. "I established as a norm that we were to be open and affectionate. A lot of people in the department had trouble with it at first. It felt unusual. But, eventually, everyone, with one exception, really enjoyed it. And productivity was enhanced."

Talbot achieved this atmosphere by

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provides the organization with successive quality management. Jamison suggests that to avoid the particular pitfalls of sexual attraction in mentor relationships, the mentor/protege couple take their relationship to the affection level and keep it there. The problem also can be put to the organization. To prevent the crumbling of effective mentor/protege coupling, to prevent employees assuming roles that produce less than quality work, the organization should help employees manage their attraction.

### Suggestions to management

There are no etched-in-stone policies for managing sex in the office. Not even from the U.S. government. Chester Wright believes "it's still sort of a myth to the government that women are attracted to men, that mutual attraction occurs. The introduction of a large number of professional women in the work place has made a substantial impact, and nobody has really come to grips with it yet."

In an article last year in the *Harvard Business Review*, Eliza Collins examined

Jamison makes these suggestions to organizations:

- Provide clear guidelines to managers on what is considered taboo in the organization. Also, define sexual attraction and distinguish it from sexual harassment.
- Teach managers to deal with sexual attraction in the most human and caring way possible. Teach them to take special care in cases of taboo relationships. Remind them to be nondiscriminatory in dealing with homosexual relationships. Managers also should learn to help employees define the levels and appropriate behaviors of their relationships. Through this, employees will become more aware and more in control of sexual tensions.
- Teach managers to deal with relationships that affect work negatively by discussing the problems with the employees involved. Talk first with the higher ranking of the two, then talk with the other.

Lester Talbot agrees with the education approach. He is involved in Penn Mutual's current efforts to teach its employees about sexism, sex discrimina-

making his own behavior a model and displaying personal concern for employees. "I let them know that expressing emotions is okay."

When the air of the office is more conducive to the expression of natural emotions, when it no longer is strange and unusual for co-workers to exchange affections, the disruptive qualities of sexual attraction in the office will be lessened. Warmth will replace sterility, and a more productive work environment will grow.

### References

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