

Finding Love in the Workplace

When co-op coordinator Terence Young came back from vacation, he found two very troubling e-mails awaiting him. The first was from “Katie Dalrymple,” a student of his. It was a very angry e-mail to HR. Although some facts weren’t clear, she basically was accusing her manager of gender discrimination. She claimed that she had been transferred to an inappropriate job that was beneath her because of this discrimination. She had been told that the move was made because another group was shorthanded, but that didn’t seem to add up: A co-op from her new group was moved into her old role.

Another e-mail awaiting Terence was from his colleague, Chad Nantz, who had been covering for him while Terence was on vacation. Chad hadn’t spoken to Katie, but he did speak to HR and summarized his phone conversation with two HR reps. The gist of it was that Katie apparently was having a romantic relationship with a full-time co-worker, and she and the guy in question were said to be very indiscreet about it in the workplace. They reportedly had argued in front of other workers and were proving to be a significant distraction. Yet she had not been told that this had anything to do with her being moved into another group on another floor.

Terence met with Katie a few days later to get her side of the story. She was furious at her manager, Mike Grady. Mike and one of his co-workers had been known to be making life difficult for a few female employees in their group. His reported offenses included the following:

- Mike had complained to anyone who would listen about the injustice of women being allowed to have maternity leaves.
- He had been known to make other inflammatory statements that outraged many women in the office, such as “Guys have to cheat to stay married.”
- He also was known to make “Beavis and Butthead” type comments that were heavy on suggestive sexual innuendo, even though he had been told that such comments were “gross.”

Terence asked Katie if she was indeed having a romantic relationship with a full-time employee in her group. She admitted that she was, reminding Terence that she was an older student and not a “naïve kid.” She said that the comment about she and “Edgar” being indiscreet and having arguments was not at all true.

Terence had always respected Katie and found her whole story to be very credible. Given the manager’s track record toward women—Katie’s boss had quit in a huff just a few weeks before—it seemed possible that he might be lying about the alleged arguments and indiscreet behavior of the young couple.

Coincidentally, though, another co-op who worked for the same company came to Terence two days later, also wanting to complain about concerns with the same employer. However, this co-op had a different story, claiming that Katie’s relationship with Edgar was *not* indiscreet. It was well-known that the two had been involved for

months and even that had begun living together toward the end of Katie's co-op. The co-op talking to Terence now was angry at Katie, Edgar, *and* the employer. "It was obvious that Katie and Edgar were involved; they made no effort to hide it," this co-op said. "And I know someone in their group—not the manager—who complained to me about how they would bicker about what they were going to do that night or that weekend or whatever. It was really annoying.

"But I'm also mad at the company for moving her. I had trained a co-op to replace me, and they just took that co-op and threw him into Katie's old job, and now Katie doesn't want to work in our group, so all of our planning went out the window. It really stinks."

As this was written, the company is investigating the situation. Katie is now in an entirely different group, and all parties are awaiting the outcome of the investigation as this case was written.

Discussion Questions

1. In "Finding Love In The Workplace," there is a striking contrast in perceptions at the very least. The co-op believes her romantic relationship with a full-time co-worker is discreet and claims that she and her boyfriend don't argue. Others don't see it that way. Do you believe the co-op is lying? If not, are there other explanations for what's happening here?
2. Regardless of whether we're talking about co-ops or full-time employees, is it simply a bad idea for people who work together to get involved in romantic and/or sexual relationships? If your answer is that it depends, explain times when it might be okay versus when it isn't.
3. Do you think it can be said that Katie's manager is guilty of sexual harassment? What do you think the company did after investigating the situation following Katie's complaint about him?