

BOUNDARY LINES

Whether it's dealing with difficult employees or countenancing relationships at work, a clear understanding of expectations and consequences is all important, says Stewart Forsyth.



Bossy britches

A few months ago we hired an employee for a non-supervisory position. She has held supervisory roles in the past and seems to think she's still in charge. She regularly tells her team leader and departmental manager how things should be done and staff complain she is 'pushy' and 'bossy'. How can we manage this behaviour and avoid further hostilities?

Looking on the bright side, you have an employee who appears committed to doing things well, and is prepared to give voice to that. But of course such people can be an effort.

Before we write her off as a high maintenance liability though, let's just try to get her perspective. How does this job fit with her career plans and her view of herself? Is this a demotion? Or is it a down-shift? Is this a stepping stone to future supervisory roles or to something else? How would these different perspectives fit with the reality of what is on offer within your business?

Of course you would want to make clear how you value her significant experience and capabilities. Starting the conversation by asking what she enjoys doing can give you a lead-in to reinforcing all the examples of effective performance that you have collected.

Then it is appropriate to discuss her view of her job and her career. What does she like about the job itself, and what are her

aspirations? With these clear you can progress to clarify what is expected.

Cover what the job description says (task performance and performance measures). Then cover your expectations about work behaviour (contextual performance)—the how of getting things done, especially in working with others. Try to be clear all the way through about what is desirable and undesirable behaviour. Do this by giving examples of such behaviours to make these quite explicit.

It is frequently useful to introduce the practice of assertive behaviour, and how it is different from aggressive (or 'bossy') behaviour. The use of 'I' statements and a focus on other's behaviour rather than personality can be liberating.

So, instead of 'You are lazy' (aggressive labelling), try 'I can't be effective if I'm ready to do the work and the materials are not ready for me' (personal ownership of work responsibilities and focus on non-personal issues).

End by agreeing what both of you are going to do from here in. And arrange a review meeting to check on progress.

Too close for comfort

Recently one of our managers hired his girlfriend as his PA. I've since been asked to write a policy to cover such situations. Can you provide some guidelines?

It's a bit like what the locksmith

I hired after the burglary said: "We learn best from direct experience." We all have experience of people who are in relationships, yet manage the conflicts of also working together. Yet we also recognise some of the risks in such situations.

We are likely to see more of such issues. People are increasingly likely to build strong relationships—some of them romantic—at work. There is a greater gender mix in most work-places these days, and more opportunities to get to know people at work than in more traditional meeting places such as church, sporting or community settings.

We live in a world where there are more demands on our time. It is rational to want to have your lover at work—or when would you see him or her?

Some of the risks people face in establishing such relationships are:

- Personal credibility is at risk if people feel that job opportunities are a matter of 'who you know' or 'who you romance' rather than capability;
- The credibility of some processes, and trust in the business, are risked if people feel that processes have been or could be short-circuited;
- Relationship failures can spill beyond the difficulty the two people have in re-building a working

relationship to their relationship with other work colleagues.

My policy guidelines (thanks to Hamish MacKenzie for suggestions) would include:

- Hiring, promotion and firing decisions are not made by people who have a personal relationship with any of the contenders;
- Use of objective, ideally independent, assessment and review processes;
- Ensuring that privacy guidelines prevent inappropriate access to confidential information;
- Formal notification by managers about relationships with subordinate staff (and when those have finished), and how these comply with your sexual harassment policy;
- Clear descriptions of the consequences for non-compliance.

An initiative that I would recommend is to implement discussion forums around the issues of work romance. These would work best with same-gender groups of staff. **et**

Stewart Forsyth has worked as a consultant and HR manager. He currently runs FX Consultants, specialists in creative approaches to lifting business performance through improvements in people's contributions. His Employment Today articles are available at www.fxc.co.nz