

Dear Ms. Office Etiquette:

At one time the team of people I work with were very close like a family. We laughed, birthdays were great and there was never any friction. I work in education, so there has been tremendous growth with adding more staff to the group. Just recently, rumors were circulating about two staff members having affairs - one with a coworker and one with a student. I recently had someone confirm that in fact this is true. It is against my company policy to have relationships with students.

I feel incredibly uncomfortable going to work in such an unprofessional environment. I'm at a loss about what to do. I'm thinking about quitting. I attempted to bring the situation to upper management and it got me nowhere.

- Lost for Words

Dear Lost for Words:

It's very understandable to be upset and uncomfortable when we're talking about an environment in which you and your colleagues spend so much of your lives. A teacher-student affair is still considered "taboo." But if both are consenting adults, there may be fallout for going against policy, but there's not a lot you can do or say as a colleague, in my opinion.

Teacher-to-teacher affairs are no different than associate-to-associate dating in any other work environment. It's actually becoming more acceptable to date a co-worker, due to more time spent at work. It's a touchy topic. We're not just talking rumors and discomfort. We're talking company policy and human resource issues. So, it's time to call in an expert.

Audriane Adams is president of HR NETwork in Garden Grove. She cautions that while romantic involvement between employees is becoming more popular, it holds dangers for employees and employer.

"Most women, and some men, have experienced sexual harassment during their careers," says Adams. "Many employees who do so become extremely upset by it. Even the perception of sexual harassment can have a very negative effect on the employee and often on everyone else in the workplace."

Tread carefully when dealing with the rumor mill "You want to separate fact from fiction," Adams advises. "If there is a colleague you are close with, share your concerns to validate your feelings. If you're concerned, it's likely others are, too. Review your company's sexual harassment policy. If they have one, it should be stated in the employee handbook. Express your concerns or file a complaint with the department or person who is charged with enforcing the policy -- typically the HR department," she says. "Another alternative is to request a transfer to a different department or division where you would feel more comfortable."

We both encourage you not to give up on expressing your concerns, as long as it's done in a positive and professional manner. "Most companies would want the opportunity to deal with the problem internally instead of answering the complaint in court."

Hope this alleviates some worry.

— Ms. Office Etiquette