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Setting boundaries for work relationships ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I interned somewhere this summer, and I think one of my co-workers has developed a crush on me. Now I'm back at school. He will still text or call every week even though he knows that I have a boyfriend. At first, I enjoyed our conversations, but I'm starting to feel very uneasy about what's going on. I have to admit, I may not be the innocent one either because I try to make pleasant conversation with him, and I really do like talking to him. I don't want to lead him on anymore, but at the same time, I don't want to make him mad because I've accepted a position at the company and I will be working with him again. HELP!

Answer

Dear Reader,

It's good that you've recognized your boundaries. It's not always easy communicating that to others, but kudos to you for taking the first step. It sounds like you want to send a clear message about your intentions, while also preserving a collegial relationship that doesn't make going to work unbearable or unpleasant for you. Thinking about the type of relationship you'd like with him and how best to communicate that will hopefully help ensure that you have a healthy, comfortable work environment.

Starting out by reflecting on this situation and what you're looking for may give you some direction about how to move forward. Have you thought about the type of relationship, if any, you'd like to have with him? Do you prefer to keep your interactions with him limited to the office? Being clear with yourself about what type of relationship you would like to have will make it easier to be clear with him. It might also be helpful to think about why you feel uneasy. What has he said that makes you think he has a crush on you? Other than your internship ending, is there anything else that has changed with the relationship to make you feel uncomfortable now?

After thinking through these questions, it'll be good to determine how he views the relationship. Although it may feel awkward, having a conversation about your interactions with each other may be beneficial to help you learn about his intentions. It could be that he doesn't have any romantic feelings towards you and is also simply enjoying the friendship. If, however, he does state he has romantic feelings for you, there are numerous other ways to assert your boundaries. Though it

may feel uncomfortable, you can be direct in telling him you aren't interested in him in that way. If it's helpful, consider sharing some examples — specifically, citing instances where he's said or done something that signals his interest to you. It's better to communicate your wishes, and remember, you aren't doing anything wrong by not wanting to date him.

If he chooses to continue communicating with you in a way that isn't in line with the comfort levels you've expressed, making notes of these instances and interactions is advised. That way, if the situation escalates, you're able to share the steps you've taken to diffuse it with your future supervisor and human resources. They can help intervene to take any appropriate actions and ensure that the work environment is healthy and safe. Hopefully, it won't come to that.

While one or both of you may feel some initial sheepishness after such a conversation, with any luck, the two of you will move past it and your friendship will grow into something that feels right for both of you. It's wise for you to be very clear about your boundaries, and if your boundaries are violated, seeking additional support is completely appropriate. It may feel comfortable to be nice simply to smooth over the situation, but you are within your rights to bring your concerns to your supervisor and human resources should those boundaries be crossed.

Best of luck,

Alice!

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Published date:

Feb 11, 2011

Last reviewed on:

Jun 08, 2018

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