

Case Study An Office Romance Gone Wrong

A star salesperson struggles to navigate a bad breakup with a coworker. *by J. Neil Bearden*



her pay. And given her standing in the company, they were really more like peers. He liked her, respected her, and wanted to get to know her better. So

she'd said yes, and they'd had a pretty amazing time together.

Brad: Fun night

Elizabeth: *Maybe too much fun?*

Brad: Never too much. Dinner again Friday? The new Thai?

Elizabeth: *OK, but let's keep btwn us for now?*

Brad: Sure ;)

They managed to keep the fledgling relationship secret for three weeks. But then two colleagues spotted them at a restaurant across town on a Saturday night, and they were forced to come clean. By Monday morning, it seemed like everyone in the office knew. There were whispers from some of the women and what felt like relentless, albeit good-natured, teasing from the guys in sales.

"Hey, Lizzie, I thought you were after customers, not coworkers!"

She hoped that would be the extent of the fallout, but the next day her boss pulled her aside.

"Look, Elizabeth, I like both you and Brad, and what you do privately is your business. But please keep it out of the office. I don't want this to distract you or, well, detract from your reputation around here."

Elizabeth's embarrassment quickly turned to frustration. She sure hoped Brad was getting the same lecture.

Ada: Girls night! Still busy w/ B?

Elizabeth: *No.*

Ada: ?

Elizabeth: *Long story.*

Brad: Drinks after the last session?

Elizabeth: *The whole gang?*

Brad: Just me. Others flying back.

Elizabeth: *OK. Hotel bar@7?*

Brad: See u there.

Nothing happened that first night. Yes, Brad had flirted, and Elizabeth had flirted right back. They'd spent two hours at the bar. But she knew better than to take it further. He was the CFO of their company, a software start-up with about 75 employees. She was its star salesperson. They were at a conference, with industry contacts all around, using expense accounts. Maybe the flirting would lead to something; maybe not. But if it did, she wanted things to start right.

Ada: Ready for your big date?

Elizabeth: *Nervous*

Ada: Because he's your boss? ;)

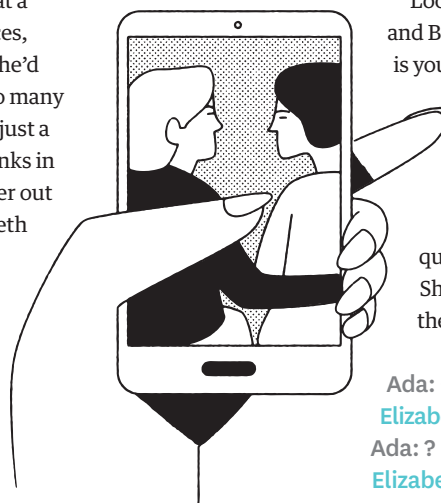
Elizabeth: *He's not! Just C-suite. And super smart.*

Ada: Not bad looking either...

It was true. Brad wasn't her boss. He led the finance team. She reported to the head of sales, who reported to the COO, and she and Brad rarely interacted at work. They'd only gotten to know each other in the past couple of months, after she'd been asked to present at a few investor conferences, repurposing the spiel she'd successfully given to so many customers. Still, when just a few days after their drinks in the hotel, he'd asked her out on a "real date," Elizabeth initially demurred, wondering if it was a good idea. But he'd assured her they wouldn't be breaking any rules. He didn't evaluate her or even set



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Case Study Teaching Notes

J. Neil Bearden teaches the case on which this one is based in his MBA and executive MBA ethics courses.

WHAT DREW YOU TO THIS CASE?

It's based on a story that a student shared in class. I decided to teach it when I saw her peers' reactions. There was deep disagreement over "the right thing to do," and people became emotional, which made for a great discussion. I've now taught the case to nearly 1,000 people, and it always has a big impact. Many students tell me they've been in or around similar situations, and most can identify with it in some way.

HOW DOES THE DEBATE TYPICALLY UNFOLD?

Some people think the protagonist is responsible for the situation she's in and should therefore "suck it up" or leave. Others blame the company's leaders for fostering an unprofessional environment and argue that she should seek legal recourse. People have a hard time seeing the legitimacy of opposing views.

WHAT DO YOU HOPE STUDENTS TAKE AWAY?

One lesson is that office relationships can have career consequences. Another is the importance of empathy. I hope the case encourages students, especially men, to think of their subordinates and colleagues as human beings with real feelings and to treat them accordingly.

Ada: Tell me over wine! Sal's@8

After two months of romantic dinner dates, daily texts, and even a brief meet-and-greet with her parents, she and Brad had hit a lull. He claimed he was busy with work, but it was the middle of the quarter, with no major management or board meetings on the docket. He'd promised they would meet for dinner after work that Thursday, so she'd initially declined Ada's invitation. But when she finished her last call for the evening and stopped by his office, she found it empty.

"Have you seen Brad?" she asked one of the CPAs who happened to be passing by.

He looked up at her, then down at his shoes, cheeks suddenly pink. "Er, I think he said he had, um, a last-minute meeting, er, out of the office."



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His stammering made Elizabeth suspicious. "Yeah," she said casually, "I was supposed to give him some numbers beforehand. Do you know who else was going?"

Now the young man looked confused. "I think Claudia? They left together." Elizabeth forced a smile. Claudia was the newest recruit to the sales team—young, eager, pretty.

"Great, thanks." She tried calling and texting Brad, but he didn't answer. So she met Ada and the girls for a bit and went home alone.

Brad: Sorry re yesterday. Work emergency. Left phone in Uber.

Elizabeth: You couldn't borrow a phone? Or email?

Brad: Busy w/ board stuff. Working all night.

Elizabeth: With Claudia?

Brad: We should talk. Cafe@11?

Afterward, she realized that he'd chosen the company café so that she wouldn't make a scene. And she didn't—even when he told her that he had indeed been out with Claudia the night before, and several times before that. They couldn't fight the "instant connection," he explained, and because things were getting serious, he had to stop seeing other people. Elizabeth wondered if she was the only one Brad was giving this speech to that day. They'd never talked about exclusivity, but she'd assumed...She felt blindsided, hurt—and angry. But she kept her cool.

"Obviously, I'm surprised and, justifiably, upset," she said in as even a tone as she could muster. "Clearly, this wasn't what I thought it was, and you aren't who I thought you were, so it's probably best that it's over."

Brad smiled, "Thanks for understanding, Lizzy. I knew you would be a professional about this."

After he left, she went into the ladies' room, closed herself in a stall, and cried.

Ada: Come out tonight?

Elizabeth: Will just bring you down.

Ada: Still bad?

Elizabeth: Constant PDA.

Ada: Let me distract you!

Elizabeth: Thx but no. Burying myself in work!

She could handle it, she thought, if they would just stop flaunting their relationship in front of her and everyone else. She felt a brief rush of vindication when she heard that the newly appointed head of HR—

a seasoned executive brought

in to provide "adult supervision" to the growing start-up—was instituting an anti-fraternization policy. But she soon learned that it applied only to people with reporting relationships, and Brad and Claudia

would have been grandfathered in regardless.

The CEO even seemed to reference them at the all-staff meeting he'd called to announce the new rules—"Of course, we're not trying to break up any happy couples!"—which prompted Brad and Claudia, seated





together in the front row, to exchange cutesy smiles. Elizabeth could feel people watching her for a reaction, some with concern, most with schadenfreude-fueled curiosity. She acted as if she hadn't seen anything, stared at her phone, and pretended to respond to an extremely urgent e-mail.

Elizabeth: Can I ask a favor?

Brad: ?

Elizabeth: Would you mind toning it down w/C at the office?

Brad: Tone down what?

Elizabeth: You know what I mean.

Brad: Not sure I do. We're trying to stay out of your way. But you have to get over this.

As Elizabeth walked into the office the next morning, Claudia intercepted her. "Do you have a minute, Elizabeth?"

Had Brad said something to her already?

"What is it?" Elizabeth said, in a colder tone than she'd intended. Claudia bristled.

"I just wanted to let you know that the executive team has asked me to come to the investor conference in New York next week. They want me to watch you give your presentation." She paused. "And you should probably hear this from me first: Brad and I are engaged."

Elizabeth felt like the wind had been knocked out of her. This was them "staying out of her way"?

"Oh," she said, trying to marshal her emotions. Unfortunately, it didn't work. "Well," she added, sounding even icier than before, "I wish you both the very best of luck. You seem just perfect together."

She gave herself a few minutes to collect herself and then tracked down her boss, who was working in

an empty conference room. "Claudia mentioned that she's going to New York, too," she said. "Does it really make sense for both of us to be there when we still have work to do to hit our numbers for the month? It's an investor conference, not a sales event."

Her boss looked at her pointedly and told her to close the door.

"Sometimes investors can become customers or lead us to new ones, as you well know, Elizabeth," he said. "But the main reason management wants Claudia there is so she can see what you do up on stage. If we groom her to do it, I'll have more of your time, which, between you and me, is a much better allocation of resources." He lowered his voice. "Honestly, if you could get past the, uh, personal situation here, you'd be a great mentor for her."

Elizabeth couldn't believe it. Of course, she was trying to get past it. But sending her on a business trip with her ex-boyfriend and his fiancée and asking her to mentor the woman so that she could take over a high-visibility role that Elizabeth herself had created? That was too much.

Elizabeth: I might need to quit.

Ada: You love your job! You're great at it! You make so much \$\$!

Elizabeth: Don't love it anymore.

Ada: You can't let B&C ruin your life.

Elizabeth: Then I can't see them every day...

Elizabeth got calls from headhunters all the time, but she'd always ignored them. She did love her job, most of her colleagues, her company, and

its entrepreneurial culture. She was a top performer at one of the industry's most talked-about start-ups, the heir apparent to her boss, and perhaps an eventual contender for the C-suite.

Ada was right about her compensation, too: With salary, bonuses, and stock options (which still had a year to vest), her package was sort of insane. She couldn't leave. But after everything with Brad, making a clean break was looking more and more appealing.

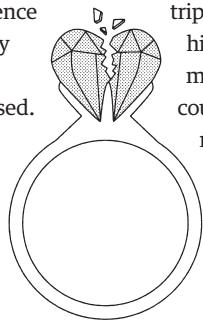
A recruiter had contacted her just the week before about a role at a *Fortune* 500 company—a big, impersonal organization where no one knew or cared about anyone else's love life. But that position would be a lateral move, with less autonomy and financial upside. Other start-ups reached out, almost daily, but she wasn't sure she was up for taking that sort of gamble on another small company.

Another option was transferring: The executive committee had just decided to open a London office, and the new European sales manager was looking for a number two. But that would mean taking a step back in her career and moving away from friends and family—and she'd still have to occasionally deal with Brad and Claudia.

Should she, could she, just suck it up? Or was it time to move on?



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Should Elizabeth stay at her company?
See commentaries on the next page.

The Experts Respond

Elizabeth would be better off taking her talents to an employer that will appreciate them.



Karen Firestone is the chairman and CEO of Aureus Asset Management and the author of *Even the Odds: Sensible Risk-Taking in Business, Investing, and Life*.

I WOULD NEVER advise Elizabeth to leave her current job before she secures a new one, but I do think she should immediately and aggressively pursue other opportunities. Her current work environment is toxic for her, in part because of the company's male-dominated, chauvinistic culture and Brad's insensitive behavior, but also because she's unable to control her reactions and put the episode behind her.

She's upset and distracted, and her manager is treating her like damaged goods; she needs to get out before her performance

and her professional reputation suffer any further. Perhaps she has grounds for a lawsuit, but consider the high financial and emotional costs of fighting that battle. She would be better off taking her talents to an employer that will appreciate them.

There's no question that many companies will find her to be an extremely attractive candidate. A successful female sales manager with a knack for talking to investors is a rare commodity in the technology world, and her current employer wouldn't dare give her anything but a glowing recommendation.

So in negotiations with prospective employers, she should have no qualms about asking for a compensation package equivalent to her current one, including the stock options she would leave on the table should she switch jobs. A key driver of gender income inequality is women's failure to demand the same pay and benefits that men get. Elizabeth shouldn't be shy about declaring her value in the marketplace and accepting an offer from the highest bidder. If anyone asks why she's leaving, she should tell them she's done a great job and is ready for something bigger. I'm not at all worried about her ability to rise in another organization.

At the same time, she needs to learn from this experience and use better judgment in the future. I don't blame her for accepting an invitation to drinks with a colleague, or even for dating someone at the office. People do those things all the time, and some workplace romances work out happily, as may be the case for Brad and Claudia. In fact, I believe

that anti-fraternization edicts are somewhat naive.

Her real mistake was in letting herself become too invested in someone who wasn't as invested in her, and failing to think through the consequences of that playing out at the office. Every relationship involves taking a risk—you might get hurt or you might hurt the other person—but those risks are amplified when you date a coworker. Elizabeth needs to remember that, recognize her blind spots, and be more careful next time. We can't always control emotional connections, but for at least a couple of years, she should make an effort to keep her love and work lives separate.

Comments from the HBR.org community

A Welcome Distraction

The transfer to London offers Elizabeth a quick out and a way to demonstrate strong leadership and a commitment to the company. She dated Brad for two months, not two years. She can easily distract herself with the new professional opportunity and a second chance at love in the UK.

Jessica Dunyon, strategic management consultant, jQuotient

Move On

Elizabeth should move on because she's still not over Brad, and it's hindering her performance and judgment. A different company may not give her better benefits or a bigger pay package, but it will give her the ability to grow and learn new skills.

Rishabh Khanna, executive, Confederation of Indian Industry

A Glass Ceiling?

Elizabeth should definitely stay with the company. She has earned her position there through sheer passion and hard work. We often talk about the glass ceiling that stops women from progressing in their careers; in this case, Elizabeth is building her own ceiling.

Gayathri Sivasubramanian, *associate professor, PGP College of Engineering & Technology*

Companies Beware

I had a similar situation occur at a company where I was a group leader. Ultimately, two of the three parties involved left the company, hamstringing growth and productivity. My advice for small, emerging ventures: Make sure you have a policy in place to deal with these situations, because they can very quickly undermine your future success.

Stefan Pagacik, *founder and principal, iAdvisor*

What Would Drucker Do?

The communication from Elizabeth's boss about how she should cope with the situation suggests management bias. My advice, to quote Peter F. Drucker: "If you notice integrity issues with the leadership of your company, you should dissociate yourself from the company."

Rudra Swain, *audit senior manager, Deloitte*

Elizabeth isn't in the right state of mind to make a decision that will alter her career.



Wendi S. Lazar is a partner and coheads the individuals and the executives and professionals practices at Outten & Golden, an employment law firm.

AT THE MOMENT, Elizabeth isn't in the right state of mind to make a decision that will dramatically alter her career and her financial situation. Her emotions are running high, and giving up without negotiating a graceful "mutual" exit would not be in her best interest. And with time, she may find that she can psychologically move on without leaving the company. So my advice to her would be to stick it out at least until her stock options have vested. In the meantime, she should build her case for fair compensation for her years of success and investment—and possibly for uneven if not illegal treatment—should she choose to leave.

As a successful, high-level employee, Elizabeth should have realized the risks involved in an office romance. The reality is that women who run astray of corporate socializing rules are often demonized, while men behaving

the same way are celebrated by the corporate "boys club." But she is a strong performer and a leader in her group, so she shouldn't lose her confidence. Now is when she most needs to call on her professionalism and business savvy to prove her resilience and worth.

Although the limited facts in this case provide no basis for Elizabeth to make a legal complaint against her company, I do see an unhealthy dynamic in the organization—one in which people at or below her level are "managed," while C-suite executives are free to act as they please. We see Elizabeth being told to keep her relationship "out of the office" and to get over her "personal situation," but there is no evidence that Brad has been counseled to keep his affairs low-key or to stop dating subordinates. To the contrary, the CEO appears to smile fondly on "the happy couple."

The company's new anti-fraternization policy is an attempt to set some guidelines, but it falls short in failing to cover relationships outside reporting lines. And it's an entirely inadequate replacement for strong leadership on the sensitive issues of personal and professional boundaries and power imbalances.

Elizabeth must carefully consider her situation in the context of the company culture when deciding whether to stay or go. If the CEO and HR director don't change what seems to be a very male-dominated environment in which inappropriate behavior from people in power goes unchecked, she *should* leave—for the right opportunity at a time of her choosing. ♥

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