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,

This may be a tricky situation indeed. While you enjoy your colleague's friendship, you're not sure what meaning he is attaching to his contact with you. In fact, it seems as though your gut is telling you that his contact is about romantic interest. It sounds like you'd like to send a clear message that there is no romantic potential, while also preserving a collegial relationship that doesn't make going to work there unbearable or unpleasant for you. Further refining the details of the relationship you would like to have with your workmate and determining how to communicate those wishes will help you establish some healthy boundaries and hopefully, a comfortable work environment for you both.

Do you have a sense of what kind of relationship you would like to have with him at this point? You know that you don't want a romantic relationship, but do you feel like you want to be friends or would you prefer only to be colleagues? Do you want to have contact with him outside of work, or does keeping your interactions limited to the office feel more comfortable? Do you want a more formal and polite office relationship, or would you want to be more casual? If you didn't have to worry about him misinterpreting your pleasant conversation, what would be your ideal?

Getting clear with yourself about what type of relationship you would like to have will make it easier to be clear with him. You mentioned you may not "be the innocent one either." Making conversation does not sound overly flirtatious, but if you are worried you are sending mixed-messages, it may make sense to decrease your contact while you are away and see if he backs off at all. There are numerous other ways to assert your boundaries, as well. You are in the best position to decide which feels comfortable, but the thing to remember here is that you
are not responsible for his reactions? if he gets angry because you have asserted your boundaries, that is valuable information that should be documented (more on this later).

One way to communicate which type of relationship you want is to state it directly in your next conversation:

"Hey, I'm not sure what your feelings are for me, but at times, I've felt that maybe you have some romantic interest. I just want to make sure you know that I really value you as a friend and I'm not looking for anything more than that."

Though this may feel uncomfortable, you don't have to apologize for communicating your wishes? you aren't doing anything wrong by not wanting to date him. Another way to do it is to cite a particular instance where he's said or done something that signals his interest to you:

"I've noticed that you call me a great deal and I really enjoy talking to you, but I just want to make sure you know that I see you as a friend and I am not looking for anything more than that."

You could also mention your boyfriend, but your boundaries about not wanting a relationship with him need not be based on you currently being with someone else.

If you decide to have this type of conversation via phone or via email, it may be a good idea to document it. Save the email or write down when you had the conversation, what led you to have it, what you said, and what he said. If he makes advances or retaliates when you start your new job, you'll be able to show your supervisor or HR department. Hopefully, though, it won't come to that.

While he may feel some initial sheepishness after such a conversation, with any luck, the two of you will move past it and your relationship will grow into something that feels right for both of you.

Best of luck,

Alice!

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