CEP Magazine - December 2022

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The virtue and terror of personal temptations in corporate relationships

By Maria Luiza Cavalcante Lima

I remember it was May 1994.

I had recently been outsourced to the company I had joined as an intern a few years earlier, and my work was directly related to an area for which a new manager had just been hired. The chemistry between us was instantaneous and evolved into a romantic relationship.

At the time, the company had no specific rules about the situation. As soon as we realized we both wanted to move forward with the relationship, we decided that one person needed to know about us before anyone else: our boss.

After all, he was the one who signed off on my expenses; I had a track record with the organization and needed to protect myself and my partner, who held a very important position in the organization.

At no point in time did we question what we had to do. Our personal values were such that there was no option. The solution was simple, transparent, and straightforward.

We reported our relationship to the boss, who started to approve my bills directly.

The relationship naturally ended after a while, but it left me with an essential life lesson that remains relevant even after so many years, especially when I started my corporate governance studies and faced dilemmas that were technically very much the same: the conflict of interest between the personal and the professional.

At that moment, I realized that this experience had been my proper certification in compliance.

About 30 years after that first test, I have often come across issues regarding conflicting circumstances due to divergent interests or just simple questions—most of them asked by third parties—in which even the best codes of conduct were unable to define, predict, or engage properly.

Codes of conduct often prohibit spouses or relatives from working in the same environment or even in the same company; yet these codes can be superficial and often ignore personal relationships that do not fit these social parameters.

The responsibility of common sense

Starting at the beginning, it is imperative to work on the team to create a sense of responsibility based on individual and collective values—more than on the rules themselves.

Any potential work partner, from the first contact to the last payment, must obey formal rules to prevent conflicts of interest as well as to respect the principles of integrity throughout the process.

After all, the vulnerability of each party depends on their role, perception, and how much their position could potentially influence a corporate decision. During any process of implementing an integrity program, sensitive issues need to be addressed in a responsible and in-depth way from the perspective of the essence rather than the form.

I highlight some without any intention of exhausting the subject: (i) how to behave when socializing with external partners, (ii) etiquette in relation to alcohol consumption, (iii) meetings outside working hours, (iv) who pays the bill between partners and/or subordinates, (v) what to do if there is a genuine interest in a personal relationship, (vi) the prohibition of external encounters and the obligation to report them versus the risks of invading the privacy of the individuals, (vii) how to judge the sexual behavior of men and women equally, and (viii) how to deal with issues of diversity in workplace relationships, among many other nuances.

It seems commonplace or even exaggerated, but history does not allow us to ignore facts. When guidelines and social media exposure increasingly mix professional and personal life, we must avoid overly formal rules that are dangerously far from practice. A gigantic challenge: how to build a culture of responsible free will.