

Inside People: Being playful with the wrong person flirts with disaster

by Sandi Dolbee

Steven Gimbel isn't a flirt. "I'm more of your analytical, nerd, geek type," he says from his Pennsylvania home.

FLIRTING AND HURTING - There is a line between flirting and leading someone on. CNS Illustration by Manny Franco. But Gimbel, a philosophy professor at Gettysburg College, has given the topic much thought. "When you constantly observe 18- to 21-year-olds, it's something you see a lot of," he says.

With only a little coaxing, Gimbel agreed to explore his observations with me ("just don't tell my wife," he wrote back in an e-mail).

Is flirting ethical? I ask.

"The answer, like so much in ethics, is: It depends," he says.

"If it's mere playfulness, it doesn't necessarily make it wrong," Gimbel says. "But if you're involved in a relationship and it makes your partner uncomfortable or insecure, then surely there's a problem there."

He says there's a line between flirting and leading someone on, which he regards as deceitful. "The line between them is often hard to tell," he concedes. There's also a line between flirting and hitting on someone, which comes with a high ick factor on Gimbel's ethical radar.

To ensure your flirting isn't taken the wrong way, he advises that you stick with people you know. Flirting with strangers can be risky because they don't know you and could misinterpret your intentions. "One of the hard things about determining the rightness or wrongness of an action is that your intentions are internal," he says.

I told him about a friend of mine, a retired flight attendant, who loved to flirt with passengers. Since they were strangers, was she wrong to do it? That's an exception, he says. "Both parties know full well there's no serious attempt to make a deep, interpersonal connection," he explains.

An auto salesman might want to skip flirting with a customer, because that would fall under the category of using it to manipulate someone for personal gain. "It's like buttering somebody up with praise that you don't really mean. ... That's a form of lying," he says.

Legal ramifications aside (like getting sued), bosses should refrain from flirting with employees, because they are in positions of unequal power.

Pastors also should abstain. "If you're somebody's spiritual adviser, they are probably going to want to feel they can come to you with very personal matters, and in that case, flirting might make them feel that they won't be taken seriously."

On the other hand, flirty performers get a green light from Gimbel. "No one walks into a Dolly Parton show thinking they are going to leave with her phone number in their pocket," he says.

He reminds us that flirting should be fun. Even though he's not a flirt, he says some of his best friends are pretty good at it. "You learn they are just playing," he says.

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