CASE DISCOVERY / EMPLOYMENT LITIGATION

THE RELATIONSHIP THAT BECAME A CLAIM

A workplace sexual-harassment dispute involving a supervisor, a subordinate, and a relationship that ended.

MERCER v. NORTHSTAR SYSTEMS

Fictional case study • Preliminary case assessment



PREPARED FOR DISCUSSION • ALL NAMES AND FACTS ARE INVENTED

A consensual relationship is alleged to have changed course.

The central question is what happened before, during, and after the relationship ended.

THE PARTIES

Dana Mercer
Department Director

Alex Reed
Project Coordinator

CLAIM AS PRESENTED

After Mercer ended their relationship, Reed alleged unwelcome sexual conduct and a failure by the company to protect him.

Northstar Systems denies liability and disputes the characterization of the relationship.

QUESTIONS TO TEST

- **Consent**: What do contemporaneous communications show?
- **Power**: Did supervisory authority affect work decisions?
- **Aftermath**: Did treatment change after the breakup?
- **Response**: When did the company learn, and what did it do?

Reconstruct the relationship and the moments around its end.

Use verified dates from messages, calendars, HR records, and witness interviews to test this sequence.

MESSAGE | CONTACT | TURNING POINT | HR NOTICE

01

RELATIONSHIP BEGINS

Personal contact moves beyond work.

02

RELATIONSHIP CONTINUES

Messages and meetings may show each view.

03

RELATIONSHIP ENDS

Mercer ends the relationship.

04

COMPLAINT IS MADE

Reed alleges harassment; company response follows.

TIMELINE TEST Who initiated key events? Were boundaries communicated? Did job decisions change after the breakup?

Build the record before drawing conclusions.

Organize discovery around four evidence streams, each tied to a question the investigation must answer.

01

COMMUNICATIONS

Texts and emails
Chat and call records
Meeting invitations

02

WORKPLACE RECORDS

Performance reviews
Pay and promotion files
Schedules and assignments

03

WITNESS ACCOUNTS

Coworker observations
Manager and HR interviews
Statements near the breakup

04

COMPANY RESPONSE

Complaint and intake notes
Investigation records
Interim steps and follow-up

PRESERVATION PRIORITY / Secure relevant messages, devices, accounts, and personnel records.

The same relationship may be described in very different ways.

Discovery tests each account against contemporaneous evidence; neither version is assumed to be true.

REED'S POTENTIAL ACCOUNT

"The relationship was not as voluntary as it appeared."

- Workplace authority may have influenced his choices.
- The breakup may have been followed by adverse treatment.
- The company may have known of a concern.

MERCER / COMPANY'S POTENTIAL ACCOUNT

"The relationship was mutual, and the complaint followed the breakup."

- Communications may reflect mutual participation.
- No job benefit or detriment may have been tied to it.
- The company may have responded appropriately.

These are advocacy positions to investigate, not established facts or legal findings.

What must the investigation establish?

A practical roadmap for interviews, document requests, and early case assessment.

01	**Relationship context**	How did it begin? What communications show consent, boundaries, or changing wishes?
02	**Supervisory influence**	What authority did Mercer hold over pay, assignments, evaluations, schedule, or advancement?
03	**Breakup and aftermath**	What happened when Mercer ended the relationship? Did treatment or working conditions change?
04	**Notice and response**	When did HR learn of concerns? What investigation, interim steps, and follow-up occurred?

NEXT STEP / Validate the chronology, preserve evidence, interview key witnesses, and assess applicable claims.