

Your Employee and Family Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Workplace harassment: A manager's guide

Most managers know that abusive or inappropriate behavior can quickly turn even the most civil and harmonious workplace into a toxic, unhealthy environment that damages morale, productivity and in some cases, a company's reputation. Such behavior needs to be quickly and effectively addressed, however, because victimized employees often feel too intimidated or embarrassed to report incidents, it can be a tough issue for managers to identify and deal with.

What is harassment?

Harassment is a form of discrimination and bullying. It is defined as repeated and persistent behaviors (although if can also be one single incident if it is severe and has a lasting effect on someone), intended to torment, undermine, pressure, intimidate, frustrate or provoke a reaction from an individual. It includes:

- Spreading malicious rumors
- Insulting someone by word or behavior
- Ridiculing or demeaning someone − picking on them or setting them up to fail
- Exclusion or victimization
- Overbearing or unfair supervision or other misuse of power or position
- Unwelcomed sexual advances: touching, standing too close, comments or "jokes", asking for sexual favors, making decisions on the basis of sexual advances being accepted or rejected
- Unwelcomed physical contact such as touching, patting, pushing, pinching or punching
- Displaying or circulating offensive pictures or materials in print or electronic form

Dealing with a complaint

Employees don't always report abusive behavior because they fear the harassment will escalate, they won't be believed, nothing will be done or that they'll be viewed as complainers. When they do decide to address the situation, they may prefer to have an informal discussion with their manager first. It can be a difficult conversation, but there are several steps you, as a manager, can take to quickly resolve a potentially serious situation:

1. Let the employee know that he or she did the right thing in bringing the issue to your attention. Stress that you need to know about further harassment immediately and that you will do everything you can to ensure everyone's well-being. Ask the employee to be patient while you further investigate.

   Understand that the employee is likely to feel emotional: humiliated, embarrassed, scared, angry and/or resentful. Stay calm and continue to be reassuring, stating that he or she did the right thing in bringing the situation to your attention.

2. Ask the employee to tell you the whole story. Listen and write down dates, times, situations, witnesses, and anything else that seems relevant. Your notes may be needed if the situation persists and formal disciplinary measures are necessary. They may also provide a record of the actions *you* took to resolve the issue. If the situation involves threats, stalking or physical violence (including domestic disputes because they can spill over into the workplace), seek help immediately from HR, security, and/or the police.

3. Inform your HR representative. Managers also need support. Your HR rep will provide further information on your company's harassment policies and how you can best investigate the matter. Be sure to keep HR informed during the process. If the situation does not improve, HR will need to begin formal disciplinary actions.

4. Talk to any witnesses. Ask open-ended questions so you get objective views and uncover any underlying issues that need resolving – lack of communication or sensitivity, different expectations, personal issues, perceptions of unfairness or unclear roles and responsibilities. Refer to your organization's harassment and bullying policy, HR advisors, union representatives, and your Employee Assistance Program for guidance.
5. Interview the accused harasser. You may find that the individual is unaware his or her behavior is inappropriate or unprofessional and in such cases, an informal discussion may resolve the situation. Clearly state the behaviors and actions you and the company expect from staff, what is considered harassment as well as the business and legal consequences.

   Expect a range of emotional responses from the accused. He or she may be shocked, angry, defensive or upset. Stay calm and non-judgmental. Assure the individual you're here to resolve the situation. Focus on performance and your organization's policies on business conduct.

6. Follow up regularly to ensure that no further incidents have occurred and that any underlying issues are being addressed. If the harassment continues, then a formal complaint needs to be made and the issue escalated according to your company's policy.

Creating a harassment-free zone

Managers can support their teams through their own actions and behaviors. For example:

- Be a role model. Demonstrate what your company expects from all employees.
- Take all complaints seriously and don't tolerate any inappropriate behavior.
- Publicize your organization's code of behavior and explain the consequences of harassment in workplace.
- Encourage all staff to attend diversity training (some organizations make this mandatory) – attend with them.
- Make people aware of the information, resources and support available through their Employee Assistance Program.
- Constantly monitor the atmosphere in your workplace. Watch for bickering, blaming, putdowns or derogatory jokes, cliques, teasing or sudden drops in productivity. Another sign of a potential problem is when employees come to you for information or clarification rather than talking to their colleagues.

Whenever a diverse group of people with different skill sets and varying levels of maturity, experience and communication styles work together, conflicts are inevitable. However, in a respectful work environment where professionalism is not only expected but demanded, serious disputes and inappropriate behaviors will be few and far between.

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