

A Sensitive And Volatile Issue

TRAINING AGAINST SEXUAL HARASSMENT

If trainers can help solve other organizational problems, why can't they help solve this one, too?

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Sexual harassment has been called the management issue of the eighties. Victim advocacy groups, law suits, congressional interest, and press coverage of sensational cases promise to keep public attention alert to the problem. Organizations are becoming aware of the need for training in the area and trainers are preparing to meet this need. Once they have looked up the proper pronunciation of "harassment," however, many discover that this is not an easy area in which to provide training. Since this is a sensitive and volatile issue, it is helpful to be able to anticipate potential problem areas. The following is a list of problems trainers frequently encounter and some suggestions for dealing with them.

Problem: There is considerable confusion about what sexual harassment is. You will have men in your sessions who genuinely believe that they are being sexually harassed when one of their female coworkers wears a tight skirt or a low-cut sweater. You will have women in your sessions who believe that they are being sexually harassed when a male coworker tells them that they look nice.

Response: Obviously you can't communicate until everyone can agree on what the words mean. Early in the training session, provide a clear, concise definition of sexual harassment. Also define sexual politics and sexism. These are concepts which are frequently confused with sexual harassment—even by people working in the area. Among the best and most useful definitions are the following:

Sexual harassment—Influencing, offering to influence, or threatening the career, pay, or job of another person in exchange for sexual favors

or

Deliberate or repeated offensive comments, gestures, or physical contact of a sexual nature in a work or work-related environment.

Sexual politics—Using sex, sexuality, or sexual attractiveness to obtain favors or job-related rewards.

Sexism—Any discriminatory behavior or practice based on sex. Treating people differently solely on the basis of their sex. (Sexism is a direct parallel with racism.)

Once everyone knows what sexual harassment is and what it is not, you can begin to discuss how to deal with it. You will find that many people will be pleased just to have it defined. After the definitions were discussed in one workshop, a participant—an elderly minister—sighed with relief. "I am so glad I came to this session," he said. "All this time I thought I was a sexual harasser. Now I find that I am only a sexist!"

Problem: Some people feel that "Ignorance is bliss." When a consultant indicated that the amount of sexual harassment within one large corporation was much greater than expected, corporate management decided not to do training in the area. Instead, they fired the consultant.

Response: Managers should be reminded that, as one military trainer put it, "When your head is in the sand, your tail is in a very vulnerable position." Organizations should be reminded that ignorance of the law is no defense and that sexual harassment, depending on the specific type of offense, may be a violation of either civil or criminal law. In addition, the Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) estimated that sexual harassment costs the federal government approximately 95 million dollars per year in such things as sick leave, replacement/training costs, and expenses related to litigation. There is also the potential cost of negative publicity.

Problem: Many managers feel that, "It doesn't happen here."

Response: Remind managers that just because they aren't guilty of sexual harassment and wouldn't think of harassing anyone doesn't mean that it is not going on. The incidence is high—early studies indicated that over 80% of working women suffered from sexual harassment at some time during their careers. The odds are that if managers haven't had the problem, they will. They should be reminded that just because they haven't heard about it doesn't mean sexual harassment isn't occurring in their organizations.

Problem: Many people ask, "If it is happening, why haven't I heard about it?"

Response: This question may be addressed from the standpoint of communications theory. Most managers are aware that good news travels up the organization rapidly, but bad news filters up more slowly or not at all. The higher one is on the communications pyramid, the less likely he or she is to be told about the sexual harassment that is

occurring at lower levels. In addition, many victims are afraid or embarrassed to talk about their experiences. The early research in the area indicated that there was a certain primitive wisdom in this. In one study cited by Working Women's Institute, only half of the victims reported the incident and in only 40% of these cases was something done about it. A common reaction was to fire or transfer the victim.

Problem: Top level women may not have any more experience with or insight into the problem of sexual harassment than their male colleagues.

Response: This problem should be addressed—and not only because these women may not believe that it is important to confront the problem of sexual harassment. Male managers will probably look to these women for verification of the need for training and for validation of the statements you make during the training session. It should also be noted that women in top management are in many ways a special group and that the same things that enable them to be successful—skill, competence, confidence, toughness, good mentorship, well-managed organizations, and even luck—may well provide protection many women do not enjoy.

Problem: Phyllis Schaffly isn't the only one who feels that sexual harassment doesn't happen to virtuous women.

Response: Naivete or innocence may actually be a come-on to some harassers. When we started training in this area we routinely asserted that there were two groups of women who were less susceptible to sexual harassment, obviously happily married women and nuns. Later, we talked to some teaching sisters and found that we had been wrong about nuns.

Problem: A common response to the problem has been, "They are big girls, they ought to be able to handle this themselves."

Response: The Merit System Protection Board found that 15% of the men surveyed had been sexually harassed within the last two years. So this is not just a "women's problem." Men have had little experience handling things such as sexual harassment and women frequently have been taught to deal with them by ignoring the problem. In most sexual harassment cases, this makes things worse. The primary reason employers have avoided getting involved is that they have not known how to handle it. Your training session should help them be more responsive.

Problem: Many still feel that sexual harassment really doesn't hurt anything.

Response: The point should be made that, actually, all suffer—harassers, coworkers, and the organization, as well as the victim. The recidivism rate is

quite high and, if harassers are allowed to continue, the offenses and consequences are potentially very much greater than if they are stopped early in their careers. When coworkers know harassment is taking place, there is concern that they too may be victimized, time is wasted discussing the situation, and morale is adversely affected. The organization suffers the productivity losses of all involved, employee replacement and retraining costs, and vulnerability to negative publicity and law suits. Victims suffer a wide variety of ill effects, including symptoms of stress—physical illness, lost time, and even lost jobs.

Problem: The issue is frequently trivialized.

Response: The first response of many managers—even managers who admit that sexual harassment exists and may be a problem—is to attempt to trivialize the issue. Humor is a natural, normal response to new and threatening situations, but statements such as, "Boy, do I wish I were sexually harassed every now and then," "Was she bragging or complaining?," and "Where do I go to sign a sexual harassment consent form?" demand response.

First, it is helpful to ask both men and women to think in terms of a male harasser. This takes some of the fun out of it. Next, the trainers might note that when men laugh and joke about being sexually harassed, they are usually thinking about Farrah Fawcett in a field of flowers. Make them think, instead, of Phyllis Diller by the file cabinet.

Finally, it is helpful, at this point, to discuss the difference between "thrill" and "terror." When you are riding on a roller coaster, the climbing and dropping are enjoyable and thrilling. But think how you would feel if the cable broke. The coaster might well be doing more or less what it had been doing, but you would feel quite differently about it. Something which may be thrilling when we feel we are in charge of the situation become terrifying when we are not in control. In actual cases of sexual harassment, the victim does not have control of the situation and there is no humor or thrill.

Problem: The sexual harassment issue attracts problems.

Response: Be aware of this and make sure that you are thoroughly aware of all aspects of the issue before attempting training in the area. Do paperwork and other business as carefully as possible. Do not be surprised if, despite your best efforts, things mysteriously go wrong. It is not uncommon for a sexual harassment trainer to find that the organization which produces his or her training tapes is one in which sexual harassment is

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rampant. It is also not uncommon to find that the training does not get done. Do your best, be professional, and don't talk too much. When it seems impossible to get materials approved by your organization, use those that have been tried and tested elsewhere. This seems to be less threatening. Use outside consultants and arm's length training materials like films. Recognizing the need for neutrality, some colleagues and I have developed a sexual harassment training game called *STOP (Simulation Training of Personnel)*. (Co-authored with S. E. Sugar and C. F. Buddenhagen, the game is available from the Game Group, 9728 Byeforde Road, Kensington, MD 20895.)

Problem: The sexual harassment trainer attracts people with problems. It is common for trainers to find a line of people outside their office doors after training sessions. Doing training in the area identifies the trainer as an interested, knowledgeable, sympathetic, and helpful person.

Response: In order to meet people's expectations—or demands—you should be aware of the steps a victim can take to stop the harassment and to pursue a grievance, should formal steps become necessary. Be aware of local help and support groups to which victims may be referred for additional assistance.

Problem: Most organizations do not know how to protect themselves and their employees against sexual harassment.

Response: Training is one of the most important things they can do. Even with a lawsuit on its hands, an organization is more likely to escape culpability if it can show that it 1) took a firm stand against sexual harassment, 2) defined it and issued policy against it, 3) instituted training, and 4) took immediate steps to stop any harassment which became known.

The training should end on an optimistic note. Merely taking a firm stand against sexual harassment, issuing policy, and instituting training, can do a great deal to eradicate the problem. Once they know the guidelines, most employees will follow them. From the trainer's standpoint, it may be difficult to get management to see the value of training and difficult to get some session participants to take the training seriously, but the potential exists to do a great deal of good for victims, coworkers, and the organization. And for those of you who are still curious, Webster's says either pronouncement of harassment is acceptable. □

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