



Building a Culture of Respect

Generally speaking, an employee has no viable claim for harassment unless her workplace has become “hellish.” Nonetheless, good supervisors will take action long before offensive behavior adds up to an actionable claim of sexual, racial, religious, or other harassment. By focusing on inappropriate behavior and nipping it in the bud, you can head off harassment claims by setting the example for sensitivity and respect for others’ views. This issue of **Frontline Supervision** will give you 10 best practices that will keep harassment suits at bay.

This Top Ten List Is No Joke

As supervisors, you’re expected to be models of respectful behavior. While that sounds like no fun, having to defend against a claim of harassment — however trivial or baseless — will suck the joy out of any office. A culture of respect for others will pay off in the form of more professional working relationships and greater productivity.

#1: Some Things Don’t Belong in the Workplace. Period! That means the Victoria’s Secret catalog, even if it’s shared only among women. That means the e-mailed list of “10 Reasons a Cucumber Is Better Than a Man.” That means a video clip of Janet Jackson’s revealing moment at the Super Bowl halftime show. Yes, it was aired on national television, but that doesn’t mean a reasonable person wouldn’t find it offensive.

If you find yourself mentally debating whether an anecdote, e-mail, or humorous birthday card posted in the break room might cross the line and offend someone, trust your instincts and diplomatically see to its removal.

#2: Coworkers Aren’t Your Family. Of course, a friendly working atmosphere is a good thing. If you treat a colleague as you would a spouse, significant other, parent, or child, however, it’s time to reevaluate the relationship (that is, the relationship with the colleague). Get back on the professional track.

#3: Eliminate Derogatory Gender-Related Language.

For example, if someone says “This project is a bitch” or “The computer system is f’ed up,” you should ask the speaker not to use such language because it may



make others uncomfortable. True, courts have recognized that this sort of shop talk isn’t sexual in nature. Nonetheless, some people find it offensive, and the workplace is better off without it.

#4: Beware the Nonverbals. One often-cited federal sexual harassment case describes a supervisor as making the sound “um um um” in the presence of an attractive subordinate. Other cases have included staring as allegedly offensive conduct. Sexual innuendo can come in the form of comments, sounds, expressions, or gestures. Regardless of the form it takes, it isn’t appropriate professional conduct and you shouldn’t participate in or allow that sort of behavior.

#5: Keep Terms of Endearment at Home. That includes “honey” or “hon,” “sweetie,” “dear,” “chick,” “babe,” “sugar,” etc. True, it isn’t harassment if the

Tip

While you don’t want to get too personal, if someone really seems to need help, suggest professional counseling (the company’s employee assistance program, if there is one). Once you’ve allowed yourself to become your employees’ (unlicensed) therapist, it can be awfully hard to get out of that role and reestablish the relationship on professional grounds.



Supervisors: First Stop for Harassment Complaints

It is hoped that if an employee feels harassed by a coworker, you will hear about it first. If someone comes to you with a harassment complaint, you should:

- ◆ in a private area, listen patiently and take notes about what the employee says;
- ◆ ask the employee to repeat the story, and check your notes;
- ◆ confirm that you understand the problem by restating it for the employee to be sure you have it right;
- ◆ not be afraid of making an “instant fix” if that is in order or tell the employee you’ll look into it;
- ◆ follow up with the employee about what you found out and what is being done to correct the problem; and
- ◆ inform the employee of the right to pursue the matter to a higher level.

term is applied equally to both males and females. In reality, however, that’s seldom the case, and a term that’s meant affectionately or as a joke can easily be inferred as condescending. Also, be aware of terms like “mom” and “gramps.” Even when used affectionately, such names may be viewed as derogatory or disrespectful toward older employees (see rule #3).

#6: Watch the Hands. A brief, professional handshake is fine. There’s also nothing wrong with a light touch on the shoulder to get a colleague’s attention. But going much beyond that is asking for trouble. Some supervisors use a “hands-on” approach to establishing rapport with colleagues – hugs, shoulder rubs, and other casual contact that’s meant in a friendly way. However well meant, such contact (especially when it comes from a boss) can make people uncomfortable. Respect others’ personal space, and try establishing rapport with a smile rather than physical contact.

#7: Let’s Not Talk About Sex. Whether the conversation is about a supervisor’s love life, a coworker’s love life, or the sexual escapades of the characters on *Grey’s Anatomy*, it isn’t a conversation that belongs in the workplace. If your employees come to you wanting to share information about personal relationship problems, the best practice is to get the conversation back to work-related topics.

#8: Accentuate the Positive . . . Professionally.

Compliments on physical appearance must be handled with care. For example, he says, “That brooch you’re wearing is interesting. Is it an antique?” She thinks, “What’s he doing looking at my chest and letting me know that he was looking?” Play it safe and keep day-to-day pleasantries on the weather or other subjects that aren’t emotionally charged.

#9: E-mail and Voice-Mail Messages. There’s another word for e-mail and voice-mail messages: evidence. People tend to view electronic communications as a substitute for personal conversation and treat them with the same informality. Remember that such messages are recorded and stored. There’s no guarantee that the recipient will hit “delete” or that, even if she does, the result will be complete erasure. Don’t say anything in e-mail or voice mail that you wouldn’t write on a hard copy document or that you wouldn’t want to hear repeated in a court proceeding.

#10: Rules of the Road. Supervisors traveling on work-related business represent the company even when en route, dining out, or staying overnight. Business-travel behavior must live up to the same standard as in-office behavior. In other words, the above rules don’t have geographic boundaries. They apply on and off the company premises. Yes, that includes the company holiday party.

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