

CEP Magazine – June 2021 'Stop harassing me!' Proactively eliminating workplace sexual harassment

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Stop harassing me! These three words are more common than we think, but unfortunately, oftentimes little is done to prevent them. Sexual harassment is usually hidden or ignored, so it is underestimated and underreported.

One morning, there was a knock at my office door, and standing in front of me was the assistant to one of my organization's client directors. Her face reflected so much pain that I asked her to come in and tell me how I could help her. She began telling me every detail of what she had experienced with that director. According to her story, he started flirting and complimenting her to gain her trust and then started harassing her by sending inappropriate messages. He asked her to meet outside the office and send him intimate photos of herself, and when she refused, he threatened to fire her. She said, "Stop harassing me!" many times, but he wouldn't. The arrogance of the director was clear; he thought he was untouchable and that he could do whatever he wanted.

An investigation was launched to corroborate what was happening. The claims were found to be true. The case was handled very delicately because there was much gossip, and the accused director was friends with other directors. As the investigating team, we even had to have meetings outside the office to protect the complainant. And at some point, there became a sense of "compliance versus the company." Lawyers were involved, the atmosphere became intense, and a lot of people were left wondering what was going on.

The investigation made the director stop harassing his assistant...but he started harassing me. And over the following few months, other cases arose from women who dared to report his behavior.

Everyone—not just women—can be victims of sexual harassment. It's a very common crime worldwide but is often not reported. So how best to handle such reports and prevent sexual harassment from happening in your organization?

What is sexual harassment?

Sexual harassment legislation depends on the jurisdiction but can involve inappropriate comments, sending or showing photos or videos of sexually explicit content, inappropriate touches, etc. Therefore, the definition varies. For practical and simple purposes, we can say that sexual harassment is the insistent intimidation of a person for sexual purposes or any unwanted sexual pressure or intimidation, whether in physical or verbal form.

In general terms, the sexual harassment crime meets three conditions:

1. Can be done physically and/or verbally (written or oral).
2. Unreciprocated physical or verbal actions.

3. Coercion, or the intention to cause harm or benefit depending on the rejection or acceptance of the person being harassed.

There is a fine line between what is and what is not sexual harassment. It can appear relatively innocent (e.g., flirting, hugging) or indisputably illegal (e.g., physical sexual assault). We can talk about examples, but there is no catalog of behaviors of what can or should be considered sexual harassment, because it all depends on the culture and laws of the country. What may constitute harassment in the United States may not be harassment elsewhere.

So, how to distinguish it? Consent. Everyone has the right to accept or reject (e.g., simply saying “no”) another’s behavior that is being aimed at them.

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