

Is The Sexual Harassment Bomb Ticking in Your Business?

Dave Jackson

If there has been anything good coming out of the scandals in Washington these days it is the heightened awareness of the dangers of Sexual Harassment in the work place. Employers can no longer bury their heads in the sand and ignore the potential of Sexual Harassment complaints. We know now they can disrupt or perhaps even jeopardize the viability of a business. It is a very real problem and it is about time that it came out of the closet and was addressed directly, decisively and unambiguously.

Although the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Title VII) guaranteed certain rights for all people, the concept of sexual harassment, as a legal claim, is relatively new.

The Concept was first addressed in 1980 by the courts and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), the United States Federal agency that is responsible for enforcing anti-discrimination laws. In 1980, the EEOC issued what were called Guidelines on Sexual Harassment in the Workplace. Although guidelines were not law, the United States Supreme Court has said the EEOC Guidelines should be accorded the same weight as laws.

These guidelines describe sexual harassment as: "Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors or other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature." When:

1. Submission to such conduct is



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made explicitly or implicitly in term or condition of an individual's employment

2. Submission to or rejection of such conduct by an individual is used as the basis for employment decisions affecting the individual; or,
3. Such conduct has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with the individual's work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile or offensive working environment."

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Creating A Positive Corporate Culture

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How often in your work do you just wish that you could start from scratch, wipe out half the employee roster and bring in the best? Well, join the club.

In our positions as human resources professionals, we often become overwhelmed with the culture we have inherited, or sometimes, have helped to create. Those of us who have been around long enough to have experienced the various management philosophies- Deming, management by objectives, quality circles, Juran, Crosby, Covey- and their resultant effect on culture and staff attitudes know that each of the philosophies has a good deal of merit and- in a perfect world- can work.

The core ingredients of the latest philosophies are simple: communicate everything, be fair, set benchmarks, document, and hold everyone accountable. Too simple? Too tough? Not really- If you understand that change takes time and is best accomplished in pieces over time.

Creating a new workplace culture is worth the time it takes. You and your staff will be happier, more productive and more likely to stay at your business. These factors create an ideal culture for all parties. Here are the steps we took to recreate the culture at \$86 Million Coastline Federal Credit Union, Jacksonville, Fla.

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Time Bomb

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Sexual harassment is no longer a joking matter. Recent court decisions have held that employers are liable for damages for all sexual harassment activities in the workplace, even if such harassment is not reported. The ruling means that there must be in place, an aggressive and enforced zero tolerance policy relating to all sexual harassment.

There are several required steps to implement an effective preventive sexual harassment program. They include:

- Top Executive Commitment
- Effective formal communications
- Ongoing training and awareness programs
- Written and unambiguous policies against sexual harassment
- Clear and published complaint procedures for sexual harassment
- Thorough investigations of allegations of sexual misconduct
- Appropriate Discipline for sexual harassers
- Periodic auditing and follow up.

Sexual Harassment is No Longer a Joking Matter.

Each of these steps must be implemented and documented so as to convey the message that sexual harassment will not be tolerated, ignored or in any way condoned. Adherence to that policy is a definite condition of continued employment.

This is a management issue that will not go away and will, if not addressed decisively and quickly, result in litigation and substantial losses.

Is the Title Seven Bomb Ticking in your workplace? Now is the time to defuse it.

Corporate Culture

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UNDER THE MICROSCOPE

Assuming you're already current on all the legalities of the HR field, as well as current practices, begin the process with your employee files. What do files have to do with culture? The type and tone of documentation can tell you volumes about current management style and philosophies with which you are dealing. Scan through some files from your various departments. Note trouble areas. This information can be fodder for your supervisory/management development training. Once you've done your reading, speak individually to all your managers (in larger institutions, this may be difficult, but speak to as wide a sample as possible). Determine the type of relationship they would like to have with the executive team as well as their peers. End your interviews with an open discussion on any difficulties they may be experiencing with their own staff.

These meetings will give you an indication of the level of trust between management levels, as well as an idea of how managers are "created" in your organization. This information will be useful in your communication and management development training, as well as in forming your future recruitment methodology.

Next, speak to a sample of non-management employees. Choose from a variety of departments, and include a wide distribution of talent, attitude and experience. Find out how they were trained; how well they believe they are doing in their jobs; their ideas on how their jobs could be improved (outside of pay); and how they go about identifying areas for improvements, as well as how the improvements are implemented.

Finally, find out how employees view their relationships with managers and their thoughts on the executive team. Ensure confidentiality; don't

reveal anything that you promised not to!

All of this can be accomplished with a well-worded survey, but you will get more and better information if you take time to speak with employees in person. One of the biggest complaints I hear from organizations is that executives don't have time for the "little people". Avoid little-people syndrome; it's a disease that leads to high absenteeism, low morale, poor performance and high turnover. Prepare yourself for plenty of footwork. Organizational culture is created over time. It must be changed in the same way. For a medium-sized organization this process can take three to five years. Improvements will be seen along the way if you do your homework, communicate and follow through.



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