

WORKPLACE HARASSMENT: LET'S TALK ABOUT IT

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Workplace harassment affects both women and men in every walk of life, in every level of employment. And yet, it is one of those topics we often avoid discussing frankly for fear of “opening up a can of worms.” Let’s talk about it – with Management, Human Resources, *and* staff.

As a recent victim of “simple obsessional” stalking in the workplace, I learned firsthand the consequences of denial, and the true value of communication in this area. I was stalked by my ex husband – who was an employee of the same company I worked for – over a period of eight long months. I did my part to keep Management abreast of each incident as it occurred; and yet, there were no formal investigations completed by anyone of authority, nor any significant attempt to remedy the situation early on. Rather, the harassment was enabled to continue to the point where my stalker was charged (and later convicted) with criminal harassment, and I was diagnosed with Acute Stress Disorder. Two months into my medical leave, I was compelled to resign as I feared returning to a building where my stalker continued working. It was an experience that turned my life upside down and left me wondering: How, in this day and age, can something like this still be allowed to happen?

I believe there are two main “culprits” that fuel the harassment flame – the first one being a lack of communication. Many companies focus on training their management and human resources personnel on harassment policies/procedures; however, they do not educate their other employees on a regular and proactive basis. They may go through the motions of having an internal harassment policy designed, printed, and posted within procedural manuals throughout their building, and they may inform new employees about its existence during preliminary training sessions. This is all fine. But it shouldn’t stop there. Unless each member of an organization — from the newest employee up to the highest level of management — is continually made aware of their rights and responsibilities in this area, then the system can fail to the detriment of all. Open discussion with staff, on a regular basis, is absolutely necessary for everyone’s protection.

On my first day with that company, I can recall being given a tour of the building, being introduced to several people, and meeting with Human Resources personnel to fill out some paperwork. They may have discussed the company’s harassment policies with me at that time – I honestly don’t recall. I was more concerned with remembering names and getting settled into my new position. Everything else was a blur. And yet, in the months/years that followed, once I was comfortably settled into my job and more apt to retain such details, there was no follow-up done – no group training sessions provided to refresh employees’ memories about the company’s stance on workplace harassment. Consequently, my coworkers and immediate supervisors were as ignorant about their rights and responsibilities in this area as I was. And this turned out to be a recipe for disaster.

It also led to what I believe is the second “culprit” that stokes the harassment fire: denial. Even I was in denial in the beginning. I knew I was *feeling* harassed but I didn’t realize, straightaway, that what was happening to me was a form of sexual harassment, and was therefore illegal behaviour. If I had known back then what I know now, I would have called it what it was when I reported it to management. I would have used the precise words “sexual harassment” because I know those words would have induced *immediate* action to resolve the issue. Then again, if the managers I complained to had been adequately trained in this area, themselves, then they would have recognized the situation for what it was, and they would have dealt with it accordingly rather than “sweeping it under the rug” in the hopes it would disappear. It didn’t disappear. It only grew worse over time. And a lot of people are now suffering the consequences of that.

Harassment is an unfortunate reality in most workplaces, but it doesn’t have to be. If Human Resources, Management, and staff make a collective effort, on an annual basis, to stay informed about their respective roles in the prevention of workplace harassment, then we *can* fight it. Rather than opening that proverbial “can of worms” that everyone seems to fear, we might actually see some positive aftereffects instead: a sense of fellowship and team work within the company; a better understanding of each other’s viewpoint; and true accountability on everyone’s part.

Open communication and acknowledgement of workplace harassment is not something to fear; rather, it is a recipe for true success in any business. This is an area where we need to be proactive rather than reactive – for *everyone’s* protection.

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