Sexual Harassment: Addressing and Reporting Complaints



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Safety Talk

What's at Stake?

According to a recent study, when asked what happens to harassers, 70% of respondents stated they believed harassers face no consequences. Imagine what this belief does to the willingness and probability of a victim reporting an incident of harassment. It doesn't matter if 100% of harassers did face consequences, perception is often seen as reality and in this case, the reality that's being seen is likely one of the reasons harassment often goes unreported and unchecked.

What do you think the perception is at your organization? What's the reality? Have you asked?

What You Should Know

- Here's one reality – employers must include in their sexual harassment policy, a statement explaining how complaints of sexual harassment can be brought to the attention of the employer.
- To cultivate a culture of trust and responsibility and encourage reporting – employees must know that all claims of sexual harassment will be addressed to determine what actions are warranted.
- Consistently addressing harassment claims is one way to encourage reporting, but you also must make reporting easy and non-intimidating.
    - If you fail to do this, it can send a message that the organization doesn't want to deal with harassment issues – whether it's true or not.
- More and more collective agreements include specific clauses on preventing

and resolving incidents of discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace.
- Where a person believes they have been sexually harassed in the workplace, they may also have recourse under the Occupational Health and Safety Act in Canada. In the US, employees can get assistance from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

What You Should Do

In addition to a sexual harassment policy, that includes reporting procedures, ensure the following:

- Supervisors are addressing and investigating all harassment claims according to company procedures.
- Employees are aware through written procedures and through action and follow-up that complaints are taken seriously.
    - This also sends a message to would-be-harassers that sexual harassment is not tolerated.
- Employees understand how to document and report a sexual harassment claim.
- Here are guidelines to share with employees for reporting a claim of harassment. (Note: you can edit these to fit with your organization's policies and procedures.)

1. Leave a paper trail.a. Create a diary and keep an accurate account, including names, dates and times, of everything that happens.
   b. List any witnesses.
   c. Write down, as soon as possible after the incident, how you feel about the harassment.
2. Let your harasser know that you are offended by his or her specific actions and that you want him or her to stop those actions.a. Send by email which will create an electronic record, listing date and time, which can be retrieved as proof later, if required.
   b. Always keep your tone and language businesslike.
3. Confide in someone you trust about your problem.
4. Request in writing, for a copy of your employer's sexual harassment policy. If your employer does not have a written policy, make a record of it.
5. If the harassment continues, then report the behavior, in writing, and request an investigation.
6. Co-operate with the investigation.

Final Word

The reality is, what happens after a claim of sexual harassment is made is a critical component of your organization's sexual harassment program. Have a plan for reporting and follow-up in place and ensure it's being followed.