Addressing Harassment

Staying alert to the possibility of harassment is an important part of creating a positive work environment for your team. If disagreements or interpersonal conflicts cross the line into aggressive behavior that may impact productivity or even result in a harassment complaint, you need to act promptly.

Harassment comes in many forms and comprises a broad range of interpersonal behaviors and communications, including those that are sexual in nature. Some examples of behaviors that may constitute harassment include:

- Statements or actions that ridicule, insult, or bully other people on the basis of:
  - Gender
  - Race
  - Religion
  - Age
  - Ethnic background
  - Political or other personal views
  - Appearance, physical features, or mannerisms
  - Disability
  - Sexual orientation

- "Poking fun" at people with jokes (practical or verbal) or horseplay.

- Name-calling, verbal abuse, spreading malicious gossip, or obscene or harassing phone calls, voice mails, e-mails, texts, or social media posts.

- Verbal threats, insulting gestures, or physical intimidation.

- The unwelcome use of profanity.

- Displaying intimidating objects, such as weapons, or simulating the same (e.g., shaping hand to look like a gun).

- Written notes, cartoons, e-mail, texts, or other media that ridicule, intimidate, or demean.

- Any other conduct that has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual’s work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working environment.

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Harassment can occur when any of these behaviors target a specific individual or general group, such as people belonging to a particular race, gender, ethnic background, religion, sexual orientation, or community. In addition, harassment directed at a particular individual could result in a hostile, threatening, or disrespectful environment for others who are not the direct target of the harassing actions. For instance, if an employee is bullying a co-worker, others may feel threatened or opt not to speak out about the behavior for fear they will get the same treatment.

If you become aware of harassment within your team or work group, it's important to address it immediately. See “How Do I Say That?” on the next page for steps to take if you have a concern.

In addition, the following actions will help create an environment that fosters respect and discourages harassment:

- **Be a good role model.** Recognize that you set the standard by which your team conducts itself. Demonstrate positive behavior toward others by:
  - Show respect, fairness and courtesy to all staff and customers.
  - Practicing common courtesy in all your communications. Remember to always say “please” and “thank you” and to express appreciation for your team’s efforts.

- Avoiding any behavior or commentary showing disrespect toward an employee, customer, or group of people. Make it clear that respectful behavior toward all individuals is a performance expectation.

- **Examine your own behavior.** Whenever you experience doubts about the appropriateness of your own behavior, ask someone you respect for her or his perspective. In addition, consider the following questions:
  - Would I want my behavior to be the subject of a news story or have it go “viral” on social media?
  - Would I behave this way with my spouse or significant other in the room?
  - How would I feel if someone acted this way toward my spouse, significant other, or child?
  - Do I let my own biases or personal experiences get in the way of how I view others?

- **Contact LifeMatters.** LifeMatters is available to provide assistance if you have concerns about conflicts or tension between individual employees or your work group. In addition, LifeMatters can help you examine how your own actions may inadvertently contribute to an environment that fosters harassment or hostile behavior.

Addressing harassment is a challenge. The LifeMatters Management Consultation Service is available to provide consultation and coaching and help you create a healthy, productive environment for all employees. Call 24/7/365.
Whether you merely suspect that an employee or particular group of workers is being harassed or you have direct evidence of it, it’s essential to act quickly. These steps will help guide you through the situation:

1. **Document.** Write down what has been reported to you or anything that you have personally observed. If you have concerns about the actions of an employee or group, observe your team and look for any problematic behaviors. Ask the employee claiming harassment if she or he would be willing to provide any documentation or evidence. Assure the employee that you will only share this information on a need-to-know basis.

2. **Consult with Human Resources.** Review your company’s policies regarding harassment and your documentation and observations. If the information you have is only secondhand, it’s best to notify HR and let them make a determination on how to proceed. The LifeMatters Management Consultation Service is also available to help you consider the best way to address the situation.

3. **Schedule a private meeting with the employee who is accused of engaging in potentially harassing behavior.** If the situation is already being investigated by HR and/or Legal, follow their protocols and procedures. In instances where there is no formal investigation, it is appropriate to address the behavior as a performance issue.

4. **Clearly explain why the behavior is inappropriate.** Focus on the specific behavior and its impact on the workplace. While you may have strong feelings about what the employee has been accused of doing or saying, it is important to maintain your composure and avoid using terms that could escalate the situation, such as “anger,” “frustration,” or “harassment.”

   **Sample language:** “When you [state behavior], it makes others uncomfortable and creates distractions for our work group.”

5. **Outline your expectations moving forward.** Clearly state what behaviors will be considered problematic in the future. For example, if the complaint is that an employee is using inappropriate language at work, be clear about what words will no longer be tolerated.
Sample language: “If you [state problematic behavior] again, you will be subject to disciplinary action.” (Consult with Human Resources regarding what next steps would be appropriate prior to the meeting.)

6. **Make a referral to LifeMatters.** Explain that LifeMatters is available to help address concerns that may be impacting the employee’s workplace behavior.

Sample language: “LifeMatters can help you deal with anything that may be affecting how you behave at work. I urge you to call.”

7. **Follow up.** Check in with the employee periodically to see how he or she is doing. It’s also necessary to check in with the employee who made the complaint or the group that was affected to determine if the behavior is still an issue. Consult with Human Resources if you have additional concerns or prior to taking any disciplinary action.

Holding off on addressing potential harassment or hoping that the situation will get better “on its own” could put both you and your company at legal risk. The LifeMatters Management Consultation Service is available to help you address harassment concerns and cope with your own stress regarding the situation. Help is available 24/7/365.

**Management Consultation**

LifeMatters is available to help with:

- Confronting an employee about performance issues
- An employee’s personal problem
- Suspected drug or alcohol use on the job
- Interpersonal conflicts between team members
- Establishing clear, attainable expectations for performance
- Addressing crisis situations, such as a violent incident, the death of an employee, or a natural disaster
- Your own personal concerns
- Any other work-related issue

LifeMatters offers professional management consultation when you need it, as often as you need it. Call anytime.