

Creating Harassment-Free Work Zones

BY BRIGID MOYNAHAN

ORGANIZATIONAL POLICIES AND PROCEDURES CAN HELP, BUT THEY'RE NOT ENOUGH TO ELIMINATE THE PERVASIVE PROBLEM OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT. THAT TAKES TRAINING.

The figures are startling. Seventy percent of working women have been sexually harassed at some time in their careers, according to many estimates. The National Institute of Business Management, in Alexandria, Virginia, says that one out of two women reports having been sexually harassed in the workplace within the past two years.

Though media attention to the subject of sexual harassment has recently increased, the problem isn't new. In a 1988 survey, *Working Women* found that 90 percent of *Fortune* 500 companies had received complaints of sexual harassment; more than a third had been sued. The survey estimated that in addition to legal expenses, sexual-harassment problems cost a typical *Fortune* 500 company \$6.7 million per year in employee absenteeism, turnover, and loss of productivity.

The most common scenario of sexual harassment involves a male, often a supervisor, harassing a female subordinate. But harassers can be women, and harassment can involve two people of the same sex.

Sexual harassment was once narrowly defined as overt, *quid pro quo*

demands for sexual favors—for example, a supervisor offers an employee a promotion if the employee performs a sexual act, or a supervisor threatens to fire a worker if the worker *doesn't* perform a sexual act.

Today, the definition of sexual harassment has expanded to include a host of conditions that add up to a "hostile work environment," a term sanctioned by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Harassment now includes unwelcome sexual behavior in such forms as touching, teasing, joking, making innuendos and slurs, and displaying sexually explicit materials.

Many organizations in the United States have written policies that prohibit sexual harassment. But experts say that policies, even strongly worded ones, aren't enough to eliminate harassment or to protect companies from liability.

Ellen Bravo, author of *The 9-to-5 Guide to Combatting Sexual Harassment*, says, "Who cares what it says on paper? If a company allows sexually offensive behavior to flourish, it sends a message to employees that it's OK to view women as sex objects."

For more on sexual harassment in the workplace, see the results of T&D's "FaxForum" on that topic, page 26 of this issue.

What's going on?

The first step in developing sexual-harassment training is to find out whether sexual harassment is occurring in your organization and then to determine what kind and how much.

One approach is to give employees the following questionnaire:

- ▶ What is the extent of sexual harassment in this organization?
- ▶ How do you define sexual harassment?
- ▶ Does the harassment involve only a few people, or is it widespread?
- ▶ Does the harassment take such forms as teasing and joking? Does it involve touching and threatening?
- ▶ How effective do you think the organization's current sexual-harassment policies and procedures are?
- ▶ Is management confronting or avoiding the issue of sexual harassment?
- ▶ Do you believe senior-level managers are committed to eliminating sexual harassment?
- ▶ Is a backlash developing among people who feel unjustly accused?

▶ Do you think the issue has been blown out of proportion?

The answers can help you create the content of your training program. For example, if employees say that they don't believe senior-level managers are committed to eliminating sexual harassment, then your training has to send a message from the top that harassment is unacceptable. A sexual-harassment program that doesn't have the clear, explicit, and active endorsement of management is doomed to fail.

After you collect the questionnaires, share the results with all employees. Your openness may engender a greater awareness of the problem of sexual harassment before training even begins.

Before going ahead, review the organization's current sexual-harassment policy and the procedures for reporting incidents. Consider making your sexual-harassment training part of a broader initiative on diversity, especially if the survey finds that sexual harassment is taking place.

Sexual harassment and other forms of discrimination tend to occur in tandem. The same organizational culture often encourages both sexual harassment and discrimination, particularly sex discrimination.

Along with formal policies, organizations need to have specific procedures employees can follow to make formal complaints of sexual harassment. The procedures should be well publicized and user-friendly, and should protect the rights of all parties. A reporting process that works well may increase the number of internal complaints, but it's also likely to decrease the number of formal charges.

Pay special attention to the rate of reported incidents. Sexual harassment can sometimes be a barometer of other problems in the organization. Studies show that incidents of sexual harassment tend to increase when employees think their jobs are in jeopardy, when they feel abused, and when they consider themselves to be powerless in the organization.

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What now?

Once you've analyzed the conditions in your organization, have established managerial support, and have ensured that policies and procedures are in place to deal with incidents of harassment, you can turn your attention to developing the training.

Here are three common approaches to training for increasing awareness of sexual harassment and dealing with harassment incidents:

Packaged workshops. Off-the-shelf programs can be useful, cost-effective ways to educate employees about sexual harassment. Also, they can help organizations set standards, as long as trainers add information about their organizations' own policies and procedures.

Most sexual-harassment workshops on the market tell employees—particularly managers and supervisors—how to define sexual harassment. The workshops also describe the legal, financial, and personal ramifications of harassment. Typically, the workshops emphasize the responsibility of supervisors and managers, as well as other employees, to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace.

Packaged programs aren't cures-all. When sexual harassment is caused by misunderstandings or ignorance, a little employee education can go a long way. But when sexual harassment is pervasive and intentional, a program that simply defines and prohibits it isn't sufficient to effect real change.

Assertiveness training. An assertiveness-training workshop can show employees how to stop behavior they find offensive, before the behavior escalates to full-blown harassment. Because most sexual-harassment victims are women, assertiveness training is typically geared toward them.

Assertiveness training is particularly appropriate for women who work in jobs traditionally held by men. Such women are more likely to encounter discrimination and harassment, and they often lack female peers to turn to for support.

A first step in becoming more assertive about harassment is understanding why harassers do what they do. Many psychologists say that men harass women in order to exert

A Step-By-Step Guide to Developing Training

If you're in the process of developing a training program on sexual-harassment issues, consider using the following step-by-step process:

- ▶ Survey employees to find out the extent of sexual harassment in your work environment.
- ▶ Write and circulate a strongly worded sexual-harassment policy that gives examples of prohibited behavior. The policy should describe possible disciplinary actions for proven harassers—including termination.
- ▶ Establish and make accessible to all employees a reporting procedure that protects the rights of both the complainants and those who are accused of harassment. Ensure prompt and fair investigations.
- ▶ Get strong managerial support for the development and implementation of sexual-harassment training. Make sure senior-level managers convey their commitment to all employees.
- ▶ Use programs that not only educate employees about sexual-harassment issues, but that also aim to eliminate unacceptable behavior.

power over them, not because they are motivated by sexual desire. The sexual harassment of women by men can, in many cases, be characterized as bullying. Generally, boys are taught to stand up to bullies; girls are taught to be conciliatory. In cases of sexual harassment, harassers may mistake conciliation for consent, which makes matters worse.

In assertiveness training, participants learn to stand up to harassment. They learn to say "no" at the first indication of unwanted behavior. Participants are taught to give harassers strong verbal and even written feedback to let them know that their behavior is unacceptable. If those tactics don't work, participants are instructed to report incidents to their managers or other appropriate people.

One of the benefits of assertiveness training is that it can boost people's morale and self-confidence,

which may help them handle harassment more effectively. The training also provides support for employees who have already experienced harassment.

Says a participant, "I now know that the problems I've been experiencing aren't just mine alone. It was great listening to what other women are doing to handle the issues I've been facing."

In addition, assertiveness training may address other gender issues such as differences in men's and women's communication styles, leadership and influence strategies for women, and subtle forms of workplace discrimination against women.

Gender-awareness training. Studies show that men and women tend to view harassment differently. The sexual teasing that some men see as harmless fun may be considered harassment by many women. A gender-awareness workshop can help enlighten both sexes about how each views the behavior of the other.

One example of gender-awareness training is the sexual-harassment program at Honeywell. The program focuses on improving communications between men and women employees. It also aims to change attitudes as well as behavior. The training encourages male and female employees to talk openly about their personal definitions of harassment and about the ways they want to be treated at work.

Through discussion and exercises, participants recognize the ways in which even subtle forms of sexually related behavior can create a hostile work environment. To avoid misunderstandings, participants describe exactly what they consider to be questionable conduct. They also work on developing mutually acceptable norms for professional behavior. ■

Brigid Moynahan is head of Moynahan and Associates, 168 Harrison Avenue, Montclair, NJ 07042.

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