

# It's Time We All Grew Up

**S**exual harassment. It's this year's hottest workplace topic, what with the Jones and Lewinsky accusations, alleged events in the U.S. military, and other news. Yet, for all of the talk in the press, it seems that the public is more divided than ever over what the term *sexual harassment* really means.

Some people argue that the sexual advances of a boss, though perhaps boorish, hardly constitute an act for which an employee can take her (or his) employer to court—unless that person can show that her career suffered as a result of refusing the advances. That's the position taken by many courts. But for people who feel they've been the victims of sexual harassment and can show no evidence of career derailment because of it, the courts' position is of little comfort.

Other people argue that, nowadays, women (and men, for that matter) are perfectly capable of telling a boss-on-the-make to take a flying leap. But c'mon: Not everybody has that kind of courage or power. Telling a boss to "take a long walk on a short pier" holds no water when you think of all the people out there who can't afford to quit their jobs just on principle, even when they work for people who can't keep their hands to themselves.

Still others insist that what we really need is a rule book to govern even the small, everyday interactions that take place between men and women at work. But that's hardly practical and would extend political correctness to an absurd degree. And I doubt whether we would get better communication between the sexes, or clearer definitions of decent and indecent behavior. People would be too scared to open their mouths.

So, where do you fall on this issue?

Having been hit on myself in the workplace years ago (and realizing that it brings up a whole host of feelings that are hard to express), I tend to side with the people who feel victimized. For another reason, I've seen too many organizations try to brush the issue under the rug. Moreover, I fully understand why some people wait a long time before telling anyone at work what happened to them—just as rape victims often don't report being attacked to the police. The reasons are clear: People feel shame and embarrassment, and they fear they'll be stigmatized.

Frankly, I'm amazed that sexual harassment has become the prevalent problem it is. I mean, where is people's control over their impulses? Perhaps we can forgive some types of behavior in adolescents, but in mature middle managers? In our political representatives? Why should we?

A female friend told me (somewhat cynically) that the root of the problem lies in the fact that human beings have been out of caves for only 20,000 years. She was trying to be funny. But, whatever the reasons, the problem does persist and seems to be getting worse—or, at least, more evident.

If companies and their employees are going to get any work done (instead of spending all of their time in court), we must have agreed-upon guidelines that will be the basis for our behavior in the

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workplace. What's more, both sexes have to be involved in forging a common understanding. As trainers and HR professionals, we can play pivotal roles in helping facilitate conversations within our organizations about sexual conduct. Even though many companies have long-standing policies regarding sexual harassment, the issue should probably be revisited.

Consider holding some fresh sensitivity sessions, awareness seminars, and role-play exercises to clarify in people's minds what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Even if your firm has done that in the past, the news stories of recent months provide a compelling backdrop for reinforcing the message of "zero tolerance" for sexual harassment.

Two, even though top managers may be on record as saying sexual harassment won't be tolerated, get your CEO or company president to reiterate that message. Some people won't stop inappropriate behavior until they realize that they risk being hauled off to jail.

In addition, make it clear that claims or reports of sexual harassment will be investigated rigorously. Be sure that sexual-harassment discussions include the mention of opposite- and same-sex harassment. A recent court case involving a male oil-rig worker assaulted by other male employees points up that same-sex sexual harassment does occur and may be on the rise.

Last, develop training to help employees understand what sexual harassment really means, while equipping them with the tools and techniques to deal with it. Not every incident of sexual harassment should find its way to court. Employees can learn a repertoire of approaches to use in handling incidents that don't warrant formal charges or the intervention of management.

Best-selling author Deborah Tannen (*You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*) says that the first line of defense against sexual harassment should involve the harassed person trying to resolve the matter one-on-one. That person can express to the "harasser" that he or she acted inappropriately. Only after such efforts have failed, says Tannen, should people consider escalating the issue in order to get resolution.

One thing that distresses me about this problem is that it shows just how immature some people can be or, at the very least, how lacking in judgment. After all, treating one's co-workers with respect and being courteous, decent, and principled isn't rocket science. But, then, we live in a society in which much of the media glorifies violence against women and objectifies both sexes. American society as a whole marginalizes women, foreigners, people of color, and gays and lesbians.

The problem of sexual harassment won't be solved easily. But we, in our daily roles, can help bridge the gulf between the sexes and make the quality of work life better for all of us.

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