

Keep Your Workplace Free of Sexual Harassment

Many employees have a vague or murky awareness of what constitutes sexual harassment in the workplace. Others worry that they might inadvertently say or do something that will trigger a formal charge against them. But in reality, it is not difficult to steer clear of charges of sexual harassment by dispelling some major myths:

- **Sexual harassment is always about how men treat women – NOT TRUE!** In addition to how men treat women, the rules also apply to how women treat men; how men treat other men and how women treat other women.
- **Charges of sexual harassment cannot be made toward an individual whose intentions were just to be “funny” – NOT TRUE!** It is the *perception* of the behavior that counts. Since we cannot control another’s perceptions, it makes good sense to avoid making statements or gestures which could be perceived as offensive and unwelcome. Even though the goal may be to entertain, it is impossible to predict how another employee might react. Many have painful memories or personal values that can trigger an extremely negative reaction when confronted by such “humor.”
- **Allegations of workplace sexual harassment always stem from verbal statements or physical actions – NOT TRUE!** In addition to these, workplace harassment can involve obscene or provocative gestures, staring, leering or mimicking behaviors. It can include graphic and written items such as pictures, text, e-mail or instant messages that could be potentially perceived as offensive.
- **As long as everyone is laughing, one can assume that no harassment is taking place – NOT TRUE!** Smiling faces are definitely *not* the litmus test for determining if a behavior or joke constitutes sexual harassment. Some co-workers may be laughing “on the outside” while truly experiencing disgust “on the inside.”

- **Once an employee has “slipped” and said or done something potentially offensive, there is nothing he/she can do except wait and see if someone lodges a complaint -Definitely NOT TRUE!** A sincere, heartfelt and timely apology can very often undo any harm that has been done.
- **We as bystanders can do nothing to stop sexual harassment when we see it occurring - Again, NOT TRUE!** If you receive a suggestive e-mail from a co-worker you can diplomatically inform him or her that the message could be offensive to others. Or if you “catch” a co-worker in the act of telling an off-color, sexually charged joke or story, you might think about a way to discourage or dissuade him or her from continuing. Example: “Joe, can I interrupt and ask you to help me with something?” While this may seem somewhat intrusive, you are actually saving your co-worker as well as his “audience” from a world of serious grief!



When an allegation of workplace sexual harassment occurs, it is extremely important **not** to publicly comment, theorize or discuss the situation with your co-workers. You could be ensnared into a charge of *defamation* or *retaliation* for making comments that are derogatory toward the alleged perpetrator or the victim. If you feel you have personally been harassed, consult your employee handbook or company policy to determine where to report your experience.