Stopping Workplace HARASSMENT . . .

Has your workplace behavior ever crossed the line into workplace harassment? The answer may surprise you. When most people think of workplace harassment, they usually imagine behavior associated with sexual harassment because it is easily recognized as unacceptable, and it has received widespread attention in the media and the courts. But there are other forms of harassment, and some are just as serious. For the average employee, the real danger is harassing a co-worker without even being aware of it.

What Is Workplace Harassment?

According to the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, harassment is unwelcome conduct that is based on race, color, sex, religion, national origin, disability, and/or age. Harassment becomes unlawful when 1) tolerating the offensive conduct becomes a condition of continued employment or 2) the conduct is severe or pervasive enough to create a work environment that a reasonable person would consider intimidating, hostile, or abusive.

Workplace harassment is covered by Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967, and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. Violation of any of these acts may result in legal ramifications for both you and your employer.

A Key Myth to Dispel

None of us think of ourselves as the type of person who would harass someone. And the truth is that most of us wouldn't—knowingly. The great myth of harassment is that it's a consciously malicious act. More often, however, harassment stems from common human failings like a lack of consideration or empathy, ignorance of acceptable boundaries, difficulties with impulsive behavior, or simple thoughtlessness spurred on by our biases or personal problems.

Understand Individual Boundaries

A little good natured fun to one person may be offensive to another. No matter how well you know your coworkers or consider them friends, you have one thing in common--a paycheck. This unavoidably influences relationships and it must deepen your thinking about how you act on the job. Friends at work do not equate to college roommates, frat brothers, or the ol' gang at high school, no matter how much we wish they did.

Our increasingly diverse culture has made it very difficult for us to judge someone's religion, national origin, and background based on appearances alone. This makes it difficult to be sure when you're on safe ground with anyone you don't know very well.

Be careful not to substitute what you think should be "okay" for what a coworker thinks is "not okay" behavior. Even ethnic jokes about your own background may cause offense to someone with a similar background.

As a rule, gauge your comments in mixed company. Avoid negative comments or jokes that broadly generalize any particular group. If you say something that seems to make a coworker uncomfortable, find a private area and ask sincerely if you've unknowingly caused offense.

It's okay to say you messed up, so clear the air. Mistakes, slips of the tongue, and other faux pas happen. The key to resolving these mistakes is direct communication with your coworkers.

Types of Harassment

Almost all harassment has one thing in common—unwanted behavior. This requires you to practice self- and other-awareness skills so you can make judgments about whether something you are doing is inappropriate or unwanted. To be on the safe side follow this rule: *"If someone says your behavior is offensive or unwanted, stop it. And don't do it again."*

"No" and "Don't" Mean "No" and "Don't"

Don't interpret a request to stop an offensive or unwanted behavior to mean that you can repeat the behavior later or do it again in a different way. Accept a "no" or a "don't" for what it means without reinterpreting it to meet your needs or desires. Accept the boundaries others want you to recognize and respect.

Harassment vs. Offensive Behavior

Although good manners and civility are the general expectations in the workplace, it's important to note that any behavior that is rude, obnoxious, or offensive isn't automatically harassment. Harassment defames or attacks the reputation, and in general, is any form of behavior that is unjust and repetitive and makes someone feel humiliated (the behavior puts him/her down), offended, or intimidated.

How can you avoid harassment? Practice being polite, thoughtful, sensitive, and empathetic toward coworkers. It's an effective and practical way to avoid creating a hostile work environment. It probably won't hurt your reputation, either. ■