

the ADVISOR

RESOURCES FOR SUPERVISORS, MANAGERS, AND HUMAN RESOURCES PERSONNEL

Addressing Harassment

For managers, there are few issues more frustrating or difficult to address than harassment. Learning that one team member or group is targeting a colleague or general group is disheartening. It could also undermine confidence in your leadership and damage morale.

Creating expectations for appropriate behavior is the best defense against harassment. Begin by having a clear understanding of what constitutes harassment, including sexual harassment. Behaviors that would fall under this definition include:

- ▶ Statements or actions that ridicule, insult, or bully other people on the basis of:
 - Gender or gender identity
 - Race
 - Religion
 - Age

- Ethnic background
 - Political or other personal views
 - Appearance, physical features, or mannerisms
 - Disability
 - Sexual orientation
- ▶ Name-calling, verbal abuse, spreading malicious gossip, or behavior that ridicules, intimidates, or demeans.
 - ▶ “Poking fun” at people with jokes (practical or verbal) or horseplay.



Inside:

- ▶ Confronting Harassment
- ▶ Management Consultation



- ▶ Verbal threats, insulting gestures, or the unwelcome use of profanity.
- ▶ Physical intimidation, displaying intimidating objects (such as weapons), or making threatening gestures.
- ▶ Making comments or engaging in harassment that is sexual in nature, asking someone out on a date after they have said no, or requesting sexual favors as a condition of employment or for advancement.
- ▶ Any other conduct that has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's work performance.

When a person engages in these behaviors in the workplace, either generally or toward a specific individual or targeted group, it may lead to a hostile,

threatening, or disrespectful environment. 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 that they will become a target as well.

If you become aware of harassment within your team or work group, it is important to act quickly. In addition, you can take an active role in creating an environment that fosters respect and discourages harassment. Ways to set a respectful tone include:

- ▶ **Be a good role model.** Recognize that you set the standard by which your team measures its conduct. Demonstrate positive behavior toward others by:
 - Practicing common courtesy and expressing appreciation for your team's efforts.

- Showing respect, fairness, and courtesy to everyone, regardless of their role.
- Avoiding disrespectful jokes or behavior.
- Establishing respect toward others as a performance expectation.

▶ **Examine your own behavior.** Consider the following questions:

- Would I want my behavior to be seen on the news or go viral on social media?
- Would I behave this way with my partner in the room?
- How would I feel if someone acted this way toward my partner or child?
- Do I let my own biases or personal experiences get in the way of how I view others?

When in doubt about your behavior, ask a trusted colleague for their perspective.

- ▶ **Ask for help.** If team disagreements or interpersonal conflicts cross the line into aggressive or harassing behavior, consult with HR. In addition, the LifeMatters Management Consultation Service can suggest ways to create a respectful work environment. LifeMatters can also help you cope with personal or workplace stress related to dealing with a harassment situation. Call anytime.

How Do I Say That? Confronting Harassment



Whether you suspect or have direct evidence of harassment, it is essential to act fast. These steps will help guide you through the process:

1. **Observe and document.** If you have concerns about the actions of an employee or group, observe your team to determine if problematic behaviors are occurring. Write down what you have witnessed, as well as anything that had been reported to you. Ask employees that report harassment if they would be willing to provide evidence as part of the documentation process. Indicate

that the information will only be shared on a need-to-know basis.

2. **Consult with Human Resources.** Share your documentation and observations and review any relevant policies. If the information you have is only secondhand, it is best to inform HR so they can determine how to proceed. The LifeMatters Management Consultation Service is also available to offer support and guidance throughout the process.
3. **Schedule a private meeting**

with the employee or employees who have been accused of harassment (unless directed otherwise).

If the situation is already being investigated by HR and/or Legal, follow their protocols and procedures. When there is no formal investigation, address the behavior as a performance issue.

4. **Explain why the behavior is inappropriate.** Focus on the specific behavior and its impact on the workplace. While you may have strong personal feelings about the accusations against the employee, maintain your composure. 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.** Clearly state what behaviors are unacceptable. For example, if the complaint is that an employee is using inappropriate language at work, specify what words or phrases will not be tolerated.





Sample language: “If you [state problematic behavior] again, you will be subject to disciplinary action.” (Consult with HR about any next steps in the disciplinary process 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 behavior at work.

Sample language: “LifeMatters can help you cope with anything that may be affecting your behavior at work. I urge you to call.”

7. Follow up. Periodically check in with the person or group making the complaint. Ask if the behavior is still an issue or if the workplace environment has improved. Check in with the accused party or parties as well. Consult with Human Resources prior to taking any disciplinary action or if you have additional concerns.

Hoping that a harassment situation will get better on its own could put both you and your organization at legal risk. Please reach out to the LifeMatters Management Consultation Service. We’re here to help.

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.

Call the **LifeMatters®** Management Consultation Service toll-free anytime. **1-800-634-6433**

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