



iStockphoto

How leaders can create a workplace that is free from sexual harassment

MERGE GUPTA-SUNDERJI

Published Saturday, Jul. 22, 2017 06:00AM EDT

Last updated Friday, Jul. 21, 2017 01:15PM EDT

Merge Gupta-Sunderji (@mergespeaks) is a leadership expert, speaker, author and consultant who turns managers into leaders, drawing upon her over 17 years of first-hand experience as a leader in corporate Canada. Reach her or join the conversations on her blog at TurningManagersIntoLeaders.com.

Lately it seems to be non-stop: Every few days, there is another news story about a senior executive (who should have known better) saying or doing something sexually inappropriate to someone more junior in his organization.

In recent weeks, it's been Uber's Travis Kalanick, 500 Startup's Dave McClure, Binary Capital's Justin Caldbeck and Fox News' Bill O'Reilly, to name a few. And this malaise is not solely confined to the business world, nor to North America.

U.S. actor Zoe Kazan recently shared her experiences of repeated sexual harassment in the world of the performing arts, and several women at Cool Japan Fund (a public-private investment fund in Japan) have stepped forward with allegations of sexual misconduct by their supervisors.

So why the seeming epidemic? Let us be clear: It's not likely that it's happening more frequently, but much more probable that it's being reported more often. And that's a good thing. The world of work is no place for anybody to feel uncomfortable, humiliated, degraded or threatened by unwelcome physical contact or verbal sexual innuendo. Everyone deserves to work in an environment where they feel respected, treated with dignity and considered as equals. The fact that more people are willing to speak up is positive.

Let's face it though, if you're male, the workplace can suddenly seem like a minefield. The standards of acceptable behaviour have changed from 30, 20, even 10 years ago, and they continue to transform as societal norms shift. As a leader, you have a responsibility to create a workplace that is free from sexual harassment. And you can't, intentionally or inadvertently, be the source of it. If you continue to operate on the basis of old workplace norms, sooner or later, you can expect to find yourself in the midst of an ugly allegation and perhaps in the nasty glare of the public spotlight.

It's naive to expect that romantic fires won't light in the workplace. Humans are sexual beings and attraction and chemistry toward another person isn't just confined to the hours outside work. But as a leader, tread carefully; behaviour that crosses the line from professional to personal can get complicated. And if there is a power differential in play, at best, it will be a conflict of interest, and at worst, quickly shift into harassment, or even assault.

So how do you avoid becoming the subject of the next corporate sex scandal? Here are four key principles to keep in mind.

- Whether it has to do with you or someone else in your organization, question whether there is a disparity in positional or influential authority, real or perceived. If one person is in a management role and the other isn't, then the answer is easy. Heck, if one party is in the C-suite, then you know you have a problem! But watch out also for perceived power differentials that exist

simply because of the nature of the working relationship. When power and positional influence come into play, even though you may believe that you have consent from the other person, it isn't as clear as you might think. The onus is always on the person who has greater authority in the relationship to ensure that the lesser power is not being taken advantage of. So even if there is mutual attraction, pause to carefully look ahead before proceeding.

- Listen for the word “no.” And understand that it means exactly that. Flippantly, a well-known corporate VP recently commented, “ ‘No’ means ‘maybe.’ ” While that likely wasn't true even 20 years ago, it's dead wrong today. And this C-suite executive is setting himself up for certain failure. If the other person refuses, rebuffs or even expresses discomfort with the situation, it's time to shut it down and walk away.
- Even if the emotions are reciprocal, think it through. Relationships at work are certainly possible, you just need to be cautious about how you move forward. Seek to remove the real or perceived power differential by reassigning work responsibilities. If that's not possible, then declare the potential conflict of interest to an appropriate third party so as to sidestep any future allegations of sexual misconduct.
- If you're observing or hearing about unwanted advances among your staff, shut it down. Make it clear that any inappropriate comments of a sexual nature are unacceptable. If you observe such behaviour yourself, address it immediately. If you hear rumours that this is occurring, pull Human Resources in right away to address the gossip and speculation before it spirals out of control. Whatever you do, don't get caught up in the crowd mentality that causes harassment to snowball: Just because “everyone” does or says it doesn't excuse inappropriate behaviour or comments. As a leader, you have a responsibility to create a harassment-free workplace culture.

Truth be told, it really isn't that hard to steer clear of accusations of sexual harassment. Every one of the situations that made recent headlines would have been avoidable if the people involved had simply recognized and understood that the standards of workplace behaviour have changed. Not only are they different from what was acceptable 20, 10 or even five years ago, but they continue to shift as societal norms and expectations change.

© 2017 The Globe and Mail Inc. All Rights Reserved.