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# Preventing workplace harassment: an organizational change perspective

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In recent years, harassment in the workplace has become an increasingly important issue for organizations of all sizes. The publicity surrounding the Senate's confirmation hearings for Clarence Thomas, the Navy's Tailhook scandal, and the allegations against several public officials have increased the general public's awareness of and knowledge about sexual harassment. However, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), courts, and Congress have expanded the scope of illegal harassment so that employers are now responsible for maintaining a work environment free of harassment based on not only sex but also race, colour, national origin, religion, age or disability. Although most of the harassment research has focused on the legal and/or practical "steps" necessary for employers to avoid liability (Champagne *et al.*, 1992; Platt, 1994; Rohling, 1993; Terpstra and Baker, 1988; 1992), a somewhat neglected issue is how most effectively to prevent illegal harassment.

A strictly legal approach to preventing illegal harassment puts responsibility squarely on the shoulders of the employer. As a result, the central issues involve how to develop organizational policies and procedures that are designed to avoid liability and enforce anti-harassment behaviours. Unfortunately, if the statistics are correct, this approach does not seem to be enough. In 1993 alone, over 32,000 harassment charges – both sexual and non-sexual – were filed with the EEOC and state and local Fair Employment Practices agencies (Myers, 1994). We contend that a more effective approach to preventing harassment involves developing employee responsibility for maintaining a harassment-free work environment, thus developing an environment of mutual respect where individuals take it on themselves to monitor and eliminate harassment from the workplace. When harassment prevention is examined from this perspective, the critical issues involve how to increase employee awareness about harassment in the workplace and get employees themselves to enforce a culture of mutual respect. This type of organizational change approach to preventing harassment is consistent with the current literature on diversity management, which focuses on culture versus legal mandates as the mechanism for change.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the issue of workplace harassment from an organizational change perspective. First, we describe how the expanded scope of illegal harassment has increased the need for proactive, rather than reactive, approaches to managing harassment behaviours. Then we describe how an organization's culture can be changed to one that values

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mutual respect. Our focus on culture as the primary mechanism for preventing all forms of harassment emphasizes the need for organizational change efforts that incorporate employee input and involvement. As we discuss some of the critical steps involved in the organization change process, we provide specific techniques that managers can use to implement the change process.

### **The shifting legal environment**

Essentially, there are two types of illegal harassment: quid pro quo and hostile environment. Quid pro quo harassment involves “the conditioning of concrete employment benefits on sexual favours” (*Meritor Savings Bank v. Vinson* [1986]) and is limited either to situations of sexual harassment behaviours exhibited by management or supervisory personnel, or to situations where tangible job benefits are directly linked to the submission to or rejection of sexual advances or requests for sexual favours. Although quid pro quo harassment is perhaps the most common definition or understanding of workplace harassment, hostile environment harassment has become the more common phenomenon.

Hostile environment harassment occurs when verbal or physical conduct has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual’s work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working environment, whether or not such conduct is directly linked to economic job benefits (*Meritor Savings Bank v. Vinson* [1986]). This form of harassment is a more generalized form of workplace harassment. First, hostile environment harassment is *not limited to sexual harassment*. Non-sexual harassment that is based on the race, colour, religion, national origin, age or disability of an individual or that of his/her relatives, friends, or associates is illegal (Platt, 1994). Both the EEOC and the courts have interpreted all of the job discrimination laws to prohibit harassment on the basis of race, national origin, religion, disability, or age as well as sex (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 1994). (For court case citations and discussions, refer to *Employment Discrimination Coordinator*, Larson, 1994.) Second, it is not limited to harassment behaviours of managers or supervisory personnel. Hostile environment harassment can occur because of the actions of co-workers, supervisors or customers as well as the actions of supervisors and/or managers (*Employment Discrimination Coordinator*, 1994). Third, hostile environment harassment is not limited to situations involving economic or tangible job benefits, or serious injury or psychological harm; rather, the “test” is whether working conditions have been discriminatorily altered in such a way as to make it more difficult to do the job (*Harris v. Forklift Systems Inc.* [1993]). Last, hostile environment harassment can involve either disparate treatment discrimination, which affects given individuals, or disparate impact discrimination, which occurs when verbal or physical conduct that is directed at all employees is disproportionately more offensive or demeaning to one group (*Employment Discrimination Coordinator*, 1994; *Robinson v. Jacksonville Shipyards, Inc.* [1991]).

This shift towards a broader definition and scope of illegal harassment has increased an employer's vulnerability to litigation in the courts. One organizational response would be to monitor closely and control the workplace conduct of employees; i.e., establish or reaffirm anti-harassment policies and procedures and severely punish offenders. Another response would be to develop a system of self-monitoring and self-management that will sustain a productive and harassment-free workplace. The latter response involves the development of a mutual respect culture that relies on employee, rather than employer, controls.

### **Developing a culture of respect**

A "cultural" approach to dealing with harassment in the workplace would concentrate on getting employees to view the adoption of anti-harassment, or mutual respect, goals and procedures as a choice made by them to improve the quality of their working environment. (The necessity of "free choice" for realizing organization change efforts is developed more fully in Porras and Robertson, 1992; Spencer, 1994.) At the individual level, the necessary organizational change involves motivating employees to take on "prosocial" behaviours that demonstrate respect for individual rights and allegiance to the needs and interests of co-workers (see, for example, Van Dyne *et al.*, 1994). At the group level, organization change involves motivating groups of employees to establish norms of prosocial behaviour such as being empathetic and defending the rights of individual employees. It is not sufficient, however, that workgroups develop a shared understanding about what are – and are not – "acceptable" standards of anti-harassment behaviour. Rather, they must also understand what constitutes mutual respect behaviours. Although harassment is a form of disrespect, a culture of mutual respect refers to shared values and beliefs about both protecting and respecting the rights of co-workers.

While there are numerous approaches for instituting planned organization change and development, we advocate a "bottom-up" approach that focuses on "unfreezing" established beliefs and behaviours. (Most of the "people-centred", bottom-up strategies for change rely on a basic model first developed by Lewin (1947). This model was later developed more fully by Schein (1985).) Such a participatory, people-centred approach is aimed at changing not only individual behaviours but also attitudes and motivations, thus developing a shared understanding and acceptance of anti-harassment and mutual respect behaviours. The more employees are involved in the development, as well as implementation, stages of the change process, the greater the likelihood that they will understand what is expected of them, exhibit a heightened sense of ownership for the anti-harassment goals and related procedures, and accept the resultant organization changes. The key feature of a bottom-up approach to organization and culture change is the joint problem-solving process whereby employees are involved in designing and maintaining an anti-harassment culture – a "total quality of work environment" – characterized by mutual respect.

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**Change model**

Based on various models of planned organization change and development, we propose a three-step model for creating a culture that promotes and encourages mutual respect:

- (1) problem recognition;
- (2) employee learning and development; and
- (3) evaluation of change effectiveness.

Several comments about this model should be noted at the outset. First, it is a simplified version of a complex process. Our purpose here is to highlight what we believe are the critical steps in the change process and to illustrate several methods for putting these steps into practice. Second, although each step is presented as somewhat distinct from the others, in reality they are recursive and represent an ongoing cycle of change and development. Last, it is presumed that this people-centred approach to change is used in conjunction with “structural” changes such as the adoption of formal anti-harassment policies and grievance procedures. Whereas structural changes focus on prescribed working relationships and expectations, they do not address the requisite changes in the “informal” system that are necessary for culture change. (The necessity of cultural/informal system changes in order to achieve structural changes is described more fully in Porras and Robertson (1992).)

*Step 1: problem recognition*

The first step in the change process is an organization-wide recognition of harassment problems and the need for a mutual respect culture. At the organizational level, problem recognition involves an assessment of whether the formal anti-harassment policies and procedures are “working” and whether employees are exhibiting “disrespectful” behaviours. If employees do not understand the basis and need for anti-harassment policies, it is unlikely they will adopt mutual respect and anti-harassment behaviours or report illegal harassment among their peers. At the individual level, problem recognition involves an assessment of whether or not employees are even aware of what specific job behaviours could be construed as disrespectful and/or illegal harassment. If employees do not comprehend or remember the formal communications regarding anti-harassment policies and procedures, they might be somewhat “accepting” of illegal harassment involving them and/or their peers or managers.

One method for diagnosing both the nature and extent of harassment problems in the workplace is an employee survey. A questionnaire could be used to monitor employee perceptions of the working environment, the anti-harassment policies and procedures, and what they believe are acceptable standards of behaviour. This information would enable an organization to audit the amount of “hostility” and disrespect in the work environment, and therefore identify any problem areas in terms of both location and substance.

For instance, survey questions that measure the extent to which employees understand the company's anti-harassment policies and procedures indicate whether there is a shared, common understanding of the policies and procedures and how well they have been communicated to employees. Based on this information, an employer could identify which policies and procedures are vague, which aspects of the policies and/or procedures are "undefined", and which managers have not adequately facilitated employee adoption of these policies, procedures and responsibilities.

In addition, survey questions that measure employee awareness of harassment and disrespect indicate the level of knowledge employees have about harassment and disrespect in general, as well as specific incidents of harassment in the workplace. This information could help an employer identify the types of harassment that are misunderstood and/or commonplace, the amount of peer pressure that exists to conform and/or "inform", and work areas where harassment and disrespect is severe and/or pervasive. The Appendix lists examples of survey questions that could be used for such a mutual respect audit.

The results of this type of audit provide the necessary information to evaluate the organization's work climate and the effectiveness of the harassment policies/procedures. By thoroughly diagnosing the need for change efforts and the nature of the problem (i.e. structural/system problems versus individual/person problems), organizations can create change management strategies and programmes that are most appropriate to their particular situation.

It should be noted that it is critical for organizations to follow up and take actions to solve any problems indicated in the audit. Otherwise, the survey results could be used as evidence of a pervasive hostile environment. Although it could be argued that the audit result in and of itself could provide evidence of harassment, which suggests organizations should not conduct an audit to begin with, such a "don't ask" approach implies that reactive, corrective action is the best and only way to handle harassment in the workplace. We argue that the more socially-responsible approach is to "ask" and then follow up, which shows that the organization is not only concerned about potential harassment but is also interested in preventive rather than purely reactive measures to managing diversity in the workplace.

*Step 2: employee learning and development*

The second step involves creating a desire to change, soliciting input about how to change, and designing development programmes to implement change (Schein, 1985). In order to create a desire to change, employees themselves must feel a need for change. Instead of sending employees training programmes that emphasize "obedience" to predetermined policies, employers could initially share the mutual respect audit results with employees and have everyone participate in open discussions about the need for change and employees' responsibility for enacting and enforcing change. If employees are given the

opportunity openly to discuss their complaints, opinions, questions, or reservations about the need for a mutual respect, harassment-free work environment, they may become more aware of the problems and more sensitive to the needs and interests of their co-workers.

Group problem-solving techniques such as employee focus groups, “quality-of-work-environment” circles, “helping and hindering” charts, and “work group interaction critiques” can be used to create a consensus about the need for mutual respect and the specific behaviours inherent in a culture of mutual respect. These group techniques can be used to empower the workforce to effect change. By informing employees about all aspects of the current situation, and encouraging and challenging them to take responsibility for creating a new culture, the change may be viewed by employees as a choice they made in order to improve the quality of work life. So long as it is the employees themselves who choose to “limit” their behaviours in agreed ways and establish new ways of interacting, a strong mutual respect culture is more likely to evolve (Spencer, 1994).

Once employees perceive a need for change and have been empowered to effect change, a learning environment has been created that will enable them to change. At this point, employees can work in groups to develop a list of behaviours that exemplify a mutual respect work environment and a list that exemplifies disrespect. The survey items shown in the Appendix could serve as a starting point. Ultimately, the input from all employee groups can be merged to form a list of “respectful” behaviours that represent the “ideal state”, which can serve both as a goal for all employees to achieve and a basis for subsequent evaluation. The use of group problem-solving techniques essentially allows the employees themselves to develop their mutual respect “model”.

Based on the results of the audit and the input from employees, employers can now target employee development programmes to focus on the underlying source of harassment or disrespect problems in their particular organization. If the harassment problems stem from poor communication between managers and employees, then training programmes to improve communication and interpersonal skills of both managers and employees would be appropriate. If the problems stem from a lack of knowledge, then training programmes to educate employees about the laws, organizational policies and procedures, and varied perceptions about harassment would be appropriate. However, if the problems stem from lack of consensus or resistance to change, then training programmes must go beyond informational content and focus on interpersonal relations and conflict management skill development. Techniques such as sensitivity training, cultural and diversity awareness training, harassment simulations, role-plays, behaviour modelling, and team building are all “active learning” programmes that give employees first-hand experience in dealing with problem situations. These experiential training methods are most appropriate for changing people’s attitudes and motivations in addition to behaviours.

By implementing these three facets of learning and development, an employer can manage the organizational change process and influence the creation of a mutual respect culture. As individuals learn about and are motivated to take on behaviours that demonstrate concern and respect for others, and as workgroups adopt prosocial norms, a culture of mutual respect evolves. In order to determine the strength of the new culture and the direction (positive or negative) of change, evaluation procedures such as those described below could be adopted.

*Step 3: evaluation of change effectiveness*

The third step in the change process involves obtaining feedback about whether or not the change efforts worked. An evaluation of individual employee job behaviours could be conducted to determine the effectiveness of the employee learning and development programmes. In this regard, a development-oriented performance appraisal instrument can be used to evaluate job behaviours that either promote or violate the mutual respect culture. To do this, firms would need to expand the scope of job behaviours contained in the typical appraisal instrument to include behaviours that are both “prosocial” and “antisocial”. Although the actual content (job behaviours) of the appraisal form will vary from employer to employer, the prosocial and antisocial behavioural dimensions to be used in the evaluation could be based on the list of behaviours previously developed by the employees themselves in step 2 of our model. The evaluation should be conducted by multiple raters (i.e. supervisors, subordinates, peers and self-raters) in order to get a more reliable assessment of employee harassment behaviours.

In addition to formal appraisals, informal appraisals could be conducted through the use of focus groups and/or quality-of-work-environment circles; i.e. have employees voluntarily get together with management to discuss their complaints, opinions, questions or suggestions about harassment and disrespect in the workplace. The benefits of using an informal approach as a supplement to formal appraisals include better rapport between supervisors and co-workers, more opportunity for conflict prevention and conflict management, and an ongoing, open system of employee involvement.

*Evaluation of change*

An evaluation of the overall change efforts entails a re-audit of the need for change; i.e. re-administer the mutual respect audit. By using the same instrument at different times, organizational “improvement scores” can be developed to track the progress of culture change on both an overall and workgroup basis. The results of this re-audit can be used for: identifying the need for more change; developing more targeted learning and development programmes; and monitoring the effectiveness of both the structural (policies and procedures) and cultural (learning and development) change programmes.

Taken together, these two evaluations (individual and overall) illustrate how an organization can “maintain” a harassment-free working environment. By

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using systematic feedback mechanisms, and stressing the development rather than punitive consequences of self and peer reporting, employees will be more likely to learn and exhibit the kinds of prosocial behaviours necessary for a mutual respect culture. Furthermore, the organization has an ongoing means of diagnosing problem areas and developing culture-specific versus “shotgun” remedies to any problems that arise. In addition, follow-up meetings where evaluation results are shared with employees provide a means of involving everyone in evaluating the success of their change efforts and setting goals for future change efforts. As employees begin to trust management and perceive the anti-harassment policies, procedures, and programmes to be fair and equitable, a culture of mutual respect should evolve.

### **Conclusions**

The EEOC and the courts have admonished employers to take actions to prevent as well as correct harassment in the workplace. In addition, they have expanded the scope of illegal harassment to include not only sex but race, colour, age, religion, ethnic background and disability. Although preventive measures such as developing anti-harassment policies, training/diversity programmes, and complaint and grievance procedures are a necessary first step, it is unrealistic to assume that these actions alone will prevent illegal harassment from occurring. Indeed, between 1988 and 1993, the number of sexual and non-sexual harassment charges filed with the EEOC and state fair employment agencies increased 117 per cent (Myers, 1994). One researcher has projected a five-fold increase in harassment charges from 1993 to the year 2005 ; given the current data and reporting trends, there could be 160,000 workplace harassment charges filed by the year 2005 (Myers, 1994). This projection does not include those cases of harassment that go unreported! Therefore, if organizations truly want to extinguish harassment in the workplace, they need to change the way they approach the problem.

First, employers need to stop emphasizing what employees should not do (harass others) and start stressing what employees should do, namely, treat others with respect. If employees truly respected each other, there would be no incidents of harassment. In addition to focusing on employee empowerment techniques discussed previously as a means of changing culture, the impact of “leaders” should be recognized and managed. Ideally, leaders create a vision of the future and demonstrate that vision through their actions (Bass, 1985; Conger and Kanungo, 1987). If employees believe in the vision and believe that their behaviour will lead to the accomplishment of related goals, they will behave accordingly. The creation of a workplace characterized by mutual respect is a vision that employers and employees should embrace. If leaders communicate organizational values, priorities, expectations and concerns, and also model that vision, they can have a significant impact on the development of a mutual respect culture. While a culture of mutual respect is

not a utopia, it should result in higher job satisfaction, less conflict, and lower stress.

Second, employers also need to switch their approach to solving the harassment problem from a top-down to a bottom-up approach. With today's trend towards empowerment, total quality management, and employee participation, it is inconsistent to rely only on rules and punishments as a means of preventing and eliminating harassment. Rather, firms need to approach this issue just as they do other organizational change efforts and ask employees to help define what constitutes a mutual respect culture. This approach will ultimately change employees' attitudes, the organization's culture and norms, and lead to a shared understanding and acceptance of both anti-harassment and mutual respect behaviours.

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**Appendix. Mutual respect audit questionnaire**

*Section I. Knowledge about anti-harassment policies and procedures*

Do you understand the policies and procedures about harassment as they relate to all forms of harassment (sex, race, religion, ethnic, age and disability)? For each item listed below, circle the number (1-5) that best describes your level of understanding.

- 1 = Fully understand
- 2 = Understand most but not all aspects
- 3 = Generally understand but do not know specifics
- 4 = Very limited knowledge and understanding
- 5 = Do not understand

1. I understand what kinds of behaviour constitute illegal harassment.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I understand the company's "attitude" towards harassment.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I understand how to file a harassment complaint within the firm.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I understand the sanctions associated with harassment.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I understand the laws that prohibit harassment in the workforce.	1	2	3	4	5

*Section II. Awareness about harassment*

Are you currently aware of, or have you observed or experienced, any of the following behaviours in the workplace? For each item listed below, circle Yes or No.

1. Managers/co-workers remark that employees of particular religious or ethnic backgrounds have some common negative trait.	Yes	No
2. Managers/co-workers make fun of the traditions, customs, and/or practices of those who follow one or more religions.	Yes	No
3. Managers/co-workers mimic the behaviour of those who are members of a specific ethnic group.	Yes	No
4. Managers/co-workers make disparaging remarks about some workers that relate to their race, sex, age, religion and/or disability.	Yes	No
5. Managers/co-workers tell racial, sexual, "old age" and/or ethnic jokes.	Yes	No

*Section III. Perceptions of mutual respect*

How often do the following behaviours occur in the workplace? For each item listed below, circle the number (1-5) that best describes the frequency of these behaviours.

- 1 = Always
- 2 = Often
- 3 = Sometimes
- 4 = Rarely
- 5 = Never

1. Co-workers tease and badger one another.	1	2	3	4	5
2. Co-workers call each other by derogatory or demeaning names.	1	2	3	4	5
3. Co-workers tell offensive jokes that perpetuate stereotypes.	1	2	3	4	5
4. Co-workers display offensive materials in common areas.	1	2	3	4	5
5. Co-workers sabotage or otherwise vandalize other employees' property.	1	2	3	4	5