

### *Offending Others*

#### **I don't mean to offend anyone, so what's the big deal?**

*It's not the intention that matters; it's the impact on the other person. And the big deal is that your job is on the line.*

If you're thinking that it's difficult to know how to behave at work, you're right—sort of. It's easy to blow this out of proportion, though, and say that you're not allowed to be yourself or that the world has gone too PC. But political correctness at work is really just a matter of respecting the people around you.

The way you act and what you say when you are out with a group of friends on a Saturday night may be different from how you act and what you say while you're at work. You can be yourself in both environments, just a different part of yourself.

At work, clueless doesn't count. If you find yourself offending people without meaning to, get a clue. Think about what you say and do before you say or do it.

#### **What if a co-worker tells me I've offended him or her?**

*Just say, "I'm sorry."*

If it wasn't your intention to offend your co-worker, a genuine "I'm sorry" will quickly put the incident in the past. Yes, it may be a little embarrassing for you, but consider the courage it took your co-worker to tell you.

Now, if you *did* intend to offend, an "I'm sorry" is a good place to start. But, most importantly, consider yourself warned and don't do it again. Negative or offensive comments among co-workers only make it more difficult to work, which is why you're together in the first place. And, keep in mind that a pattern could lead to serious consequences, including loss of employment and even legal action.

#### **How can I have any fun at work if I have to be politically correct all the time?**

*You don't get paid to have fun; you get paid to work.*

Actually, you can—and should—have fun while you work. We all spend too much time at work not to enjoy it. However, that fun shouldn't be at the expense of someone else.

If you're getting caught up with what's PC and what isn't, you're missing the point. Consider the feelings of your co-workers because it's the right thing to do. Making fun of people or sexually charging the workplace with your comments, suggestions and behaviors is inappropriate. Try having fun by enjoying your job and the people with whom you work.

## Why do I have to stop telling jokes if everyone laughs?

*Because “Ha ha ha. That’s a good one” may really mean “Ha ha ha. I can’t believe she just said that.”*

Actually, telling jokes is fine as long as they aren’t offensive. Everyone likes a good laugh. But sometimes co-workers may laugh even though they’re cringing inside. If your jokes are sexual in nature or make fun of people for any reason, share them after hours and outside of work—or not at all.

## What if I think the jokes are funny?

*Laugh along with the rest of them and then....*

Say something like, *“That’s pretty funny, but I don’t think we should be telling jokes like this at work. They could be offensive.”* If it happens again, try speaking up without laughing.

## Offensive Cartoons, Posters, Pictures, and Emails

### What if a co-worker tells me to take down one of my favorite posters because it’s offensive?

*Take it down.*

Even if you’d like to tell your co-worker to get a sense of humor, the right thing to do is to take the poster down and put it up at home.

Your work area is your own space and should be comfortable. But it shouldn’t be offensive to anyone else. There’s more to you than any one poster can typify. So, if you want your work area to reflect who you are, find something that reflects one of the other many facets of you.

Here are a couple of tips to help you assess what is appropriate to display in your work area:

- Ask yourself whether the humor or message is at anyone’s expense.
- Ask yourself if your freedom of expression infringes on someone else’s.
- Ask yourself whether it’s sexual in nature.
- If you like cars, for example, consider the difference between a poster of a sleek red Ferrari and a poster of a scantily clad woman lying on the hood of a sleek red Ferrari.
- If you want a calendar, consider the difference between photographs of people involved in extreme sports and photographs of firefighters in skimpy swimsuits.

On its own, hanging a poster, calendar, or a picture that is sexual in nature is not harassment. However, it is disrespectful and can become part of a pattern of offensive, unwanted behaviors that create a potentially hostile working environment. And, we know you don’t want to be a part of that.

## What if a vendor flirts with me?

*Again, speak up. If it bothers you, say so.*

If it continues after you've said something, talk with your boss or someone in the Human Resources Department.

## About Harassment

### What are the basics of harassment?

*It doesn't have to be intentional to be illegal.*

Harassment often isn't intentional, but it doesn't have to be intentional to be illegal. Men can harass men, women can harass women, women can harass men, and men can harass women. It's the behavior that counts, not the gender of the participants.

A person can feel harassed even if he or she is not the intended target of the behavior but overhears or witnesses it in an environment that permits such inappropriate behaviors. It can be co-worker to co-worker, boss to employee, customer to employee, or vendor to employee. It can be a one-time quid pro quo situation or a pattern of unwanted, offensive behaviors that create a hostile work environment.

Courts define harassment in terms of protected classes. While not all harassing behaviors meet the standard of illegal conduct, any workplace harassment is inappropriate and should not be tolerated. It is inappropriate, and potentially illegal, to bother or make fun of someone because of the following:

- Age
- Color
- Disability
- Gender identity
- Genetic information (including family history)
- National origin
- Race
- Religion
- Sex (including pregnancy)
- Sexual orientation
- Veteran status

### **Am I responsible if I just witness harassment, but I'm not part of it?**

*In a word, yes.*

As a fellow human being and a respectful co-worker, you are very responsible for trying to stop harassment. Wouldn't you want someone to help you or a member of your family if they were being harassed? And, yes, from a legal standpoint, you may very well be held responsible for your knowledge and witnessing of an illegal act. You don't need to step into the middle of it yourself, but you certainly need to tell your supervisor or someone else in authority.

### **What should I do if I feel I've been harassed?**

*Take action.*

If you are comfortable confronting the person who is harassing you, then that should be your first step. Say something like, "I am uncomfortable when you .... and I don't like it. Please stop." If that doesn't work and the harassment continues, talk with your supervisor, your supervisor's boss, the department head or someone in the Human Resources Department. Whatever you do, don't put up with it.

### **What if I'm told a harassment complaint has been filed against me?**

*Ask about the incident and, if necessary, change your behaviors.*

If it's a valid complaint and it was intentional, you need to make sure it never happens again or you could face legal consequences.

If it's valid and it was unintentional, explain that you didn't mean to offend. Although it's the impact that matters and not your intention, at least you'll feel better explaining yourself. However, you'll still have to make sure it doesn't happen again.

If it's invalid, you don't have anything to worry about. But, you can still learn from the experience. It might be worthwhile to reflect on your overall behaviors and see if there's room for improvement. Make sure to use your "Guest Filter" and act as a guest in someone's personal space.

Consider your behaviors and change your ways if you do any of the following:

- Make fun of people for who they are or what they believe.
- Tell off-color or demeaning jokes or stories.
- Share intimate details of your sex life with anyone who will listen and/or ask others for intimate details.
- Ask out co-workers even after they've told you they're not interested.
- Ask out subordinates.

## **What should I do when I am offended by something at work or I witness something inappropriate toward a co-worker?**

*Confront it and feel good about being part of the solution.*

It takes courage to speak up, and it's often tough to do in the moment. So don't worry about being quick on your feet. In fact, don't worry about saying anything then and there. If you need to, just walk away. Then think about what you want to say and go back and say it.

## **What if I'm threatened about "squealing?"**

*Retaliation for reporting harassment or for cooperating in an investigation is illegal.*

Federal law protects employees who file a discrimination or harassment complaint from retaliation of any kind. A harasser or manager who retaliates against a harassment complainant or someone cooperating with a harassment investigation is breaking

Federal law protects employees from retaliation when employees complain -- either internally or to an outside body like the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) -- about workplace discrimination or harassment. ... In addition, some state laws prohibit employers from retaliating against employees., but it rarely becomes a police matter. On the other hand, threatening bodily harm to you or anyone else is a criminal offense as well as grounds for immediate termination in most cases. (See your company's harassment and/or bullying policy). It is illegal to retaliate in any way against someone who reports harassment or who cooperates in a harassment investigation.

## **Can I remain anonymous if I file a complaint or help with a harassment investigation?**

*Maybe, but there's no guarantee.*

Each investigation is different. Your company is going to be very sensitive to protect the identity and reputation of everyone involved in a complaint until all the facts are known and proven. But there are no guarantees of anonymity. If you were suddenly charged with harassment or bullying, wouldn't you feel you had the right to know who was making the charges? It takes courage to file a complaint of harassment or bullying and it takes the same courage to stand with someone who's been hurt and speaks up.

## **What are my company's policies on harassment and bullying?**

*Talk to your Human Resources Department for the specific policy.*

Your company is committed to maintaining a work environment that is respectful and free from discrimination, harassment, and bullying. In keeping with this commitment, your company will not tolerate discrimination, harassment or bullying.

All employees are responsible to help assure that everyone can do their jobs in a respectful work environment. If you feel that you have experienced or witnessed workplace harassment or bullying, notify the human resources