

Respect: The ABC's Of Leaders' Competencies

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It happened and it was shocking. Somewhere in the ranks of your organization a serious case of harassment occurred. People were impacted badly by the severity, duration or scope of events. As the unit's business leader or as a Human Resources professional supporting this group, you grapple to understand how something like this could take place without being detected or reported.

If this has happened to you, you may want to consider whether the leaders in your organization were equipped with key competencies necessary for preventing and addressing harassment. If such a situation has not happened in your environment (yet), a proactive review of best practices and policies is in order.

On a sobering note, it is important to remember how deeply damaging the existence of harassment can be on an organization. The most obvious impact involves the potential exposure to lawsuits and human rights investigations. However, just as damaging are the effects on productivity, absenteeism and talent retention. In an organization where people feel disrespected or threatened in any way, their capacity to do good work is compromised. When they are stressed or alarmed, people get sick and miss work. And finally, where respect is absent, attraction and retention of talent become difficult.

Five leaders' competencies are crucial in the prevention and effective tackling of workplace harassment. From the level of team leader right up to the CEO suite, these are the skills needed:

1. A thorough grasp of the organization's Harassment Policy

First and foremost, managers need to be familiar with the organization's stance regarding harassment. This stance is reflected in the written harassment policy, and while the gist of most policies is similar, they do vary greatly across organizations. Its definitions of what constitutes harassment are an essential tool for creating a leadership force that is confident and secure in its handling of respect-related issues.

My experience with organizations in diverse sectors indicates that most managers are not familiar with the details of their organization's harassment policy. Furthermore, they do not understand the subtleties involved both in its wording and application to real life.

For example, a good policy would include a requirement that management act on anything that may impact a person's sense of dignity or ability to perform on the job. The word 'may' is crucial as it sets an elevated standard, requiring leaders to act on things even if no one has yet or will be directly impacted; it is sufficient that the action may have an impact in order for the leader to get mobilized.

Most often, training by an expert on the topic of harassment can help create a thorough, working understanding of the policy, its meaning, and the legislative context in which it exists.

2. Skills to actively promote a respectful, harassment-free environment

Promoting a respectful workplace requires, at its heart, consistent modeling of the desired behaviours. A leader who laughs at off-colour jokes or practices 'favourites' is sending out a strong message that this type of behaviour is accepted and condoned.

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The behaviours that model a respectful attitude cover the full spectrum of a leader's activities. It is demonstrated through the way in which the leader deals with cultural and other forms of diversity. It is manifested in the way she deals with dissenting opinions or with unconventional ideas. It radiates through the small practices of everyday acknowledgment of people, beginning with a friendly morning greeting and ending with acknowledging achievements. And finally, it is modeled through consistent use of respectful language and refraining from actions that are discriminatory or disrespectful in any way.

3. Ability to identify harassment, in its many possible manifestations

Harassment most frequently takes forms that are much more subtle than what is traditionally thought of as 'harassment'. It occurs well beyond such blatant behaviours as unwanted sexual advances or racist comments.

Newer sensibilities have led to the recognition that harassment includes psychological harassment as well. This is typically defined as conduct that "affects a person's dignity or psychological or physical integrity and that results in a harmful workplace environment". This notion has far reaching implications: it places a very strong emphasis on the subjective experience of the person whose dignity and integrity are impacted. In today's diverse workplace the sensitivities are much more varied, thus requiring a much more proactive leadership approach.

Some organizations go as far as to include in their definition of harassment any actions that may contribute to the creation of a 'poisoned work environment'. This again reflects newer insights into the effect that a poisoned environment has on people's capacity to work and perform at their best. This also covers bullying instances which often create a poisoned work environment.

It is difficult for managers who are untrained in this area to identify such behaviours and correctly label them as falling under the policy. Here again, solid skill development through training can promote significant change in this regard.

4. Deal directly and effectively with problem situations

There are two types of instances where managers are required to take action.

1. **Someone complains.** Where a concern is brought forth to the manager by an employee, the manager has several crucial responsibilities. These include:
 - a) Demonstrate **support**, sympathy and concern
 - b) Obtain as many **details** as possible
 - c) Outline the level of **confidentiality** the person can expect (e.g. who will the information be shared with and the degree to which the person's anonymity can be protected)
 - d) Determine what **course of action** the person would most prefer (e.g. would they prefer to deal personally and directly with The Source, would they prefer to remain anonymous, would they like the issue to be addressed in a team context).
 - e) Inform the person as to the **next steps** that will be taken (e.g. obtaining details from other involved parties, speaking with The Source, seeking assistance from Human Resources)
 - f) Commit to a **specific time** in which the person will hear back from the manager

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2. **No specific complaint.** Most managers find it very difficult to respond in ambiguous circumstances where there is no apparent 'victim'. They therefore tend to ignore situations or procrastinate in taking the necessary action.

Examples of such situations include inappropriate jokes or language or actions that subtly create a poisoned work environment. While there is no formal complaint, a proactive manager still needs to act. In these cases, the manager needs to determine which action is most appropriate. This may be quite challenging. Some questions to consider here are:

- a) Should a 'light touch' or a more serious approach be used?
- b) Should corrective action be taken in private or public?
- c) Who should be addressed?
- d) When should this be addressed – on the spot or later on??

5. Involve Human Resources or other leaders appropriately

A leader needs to know when and how to involve the organization's Human Resources staff or other persons of authority.

The first instance where involving HR or cohorts is the prudent course of action is when the leader is not quite sure whether or not a certain issue qualifies as 'harassment' and what the best course of action may be. Managers often find themselves in a dilemma in this regard and the experience of other managers or the expertise of a human resources professional can be most helpful.

The second instance in which a leader ought to involve HR and/or his or her own manager is when the situation is more serious and requires a more comprehensive response. At times this response may be an overall intervention such as training or a change in the culture.

Finally and most obvious, are the situations where a complaint was launched which requires a formal investigation. These situations can be ticking time bombs, thus requiring the outmost attention to proper process and due diligence. Under these circumstances, the manager should always seek advice and guidance both from human resources and, depending on the circumstances, from their own superior.

The issue of workplace respect and harassment is becoming significantly more important as the marketplace keeps evolving. The workplace is more diverse and society as a whole is moving toward a stronger emphasis on protecting individuals' rights. These two mega-trends are resulting in larger numbers of people being aware that they are entitled to a workplace that is respectful, free of fear and intimidation. In this shifting environment, it is crucial for every organization to ensure that it is not only well shielded of legal challenges, but also able to protect its people's productivity by providing a respectful, harassment-free workplace.



Sharone Bar-David, LLB, MSW is President of Bar-David Consulting, a company offering REAL™ solutions for creating respectful workplaces. Bar-David Consulting now offers the REAL™ Program for Abrasive Leaders, a unique service designed to help turn around abrasive managers' behaviour within a short period of time.

For free resources, visit their website and blog at www.sharonebardavid.com or contact at info@sharonebardavid.com. sharonebardavid.com

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