

Defensive management in the age of #MeToo

It's 2018. With help from human resources, managers need to carefully consider the new risks facing their personal standing, reputation and job security

Ten years ago, I published a commentary piece in this magazine, titled “Defensive management in a bully-saturated era.” In it, I suggested managers ought to add defence skills to their competencies tool kit. I cautioned that if they didn’t, they might find themselves — inadvertently and despite best intentions — on the receiving end of harassment or bullying complaints.

It’s now 2018, and managers need to consider new risks facing their personal standing, reputation and even job security. And HR professionals can and should do a better job to prepare, warn, support and equip managers with the necessary skills to help them avoid getting into trouble.

Mostly, the new era requires managers to understand that sensitivity to diversity is growing, that gender is no longer a male-female dichotomy, that the #MeToo movement is sweeping through our culture and workplaces, and that the requirement for employers to provide a psychologically safe workplace is a fact of life.

As a coach to abrasive leaders and managers who require one-on-one sensitivity training, I encounter first-hand the devastating results that oblivious leaders can suffer when they fail to understand these risks and modify their conduct accordingly.



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GUEST COMMENTARY

A few examples:

- A leader’s upcoming promotion to regional manager is put on hold due to one sexually laden comment he allegedly made a decade earlier, which was neither brought forth at the time nor substantiated at present.
- A manager who prides herself on maintaining a family-like team culture gets into trouble for attempting to support an employee who lost a family member to a long illness, telling the person “it was a good thing, even God’s will” that the person had passed away.
- A progressive leader faces tough questions after a recently hired visible minority employee resigns abruptly, citing the cause as a “culturally unsafe workplace.”

• Another senior leader, who for decades had the habit of lightly touching his (male and female) employees while talking, almost loses his job when a young female employee complains the touch is sexual.

In all these cases, these highly intelligent, capable, experienced managers were stunned by the allegations, and embarrassed, humiliated and baffled by the serious ramifications they faced. They didn’t know what had hit them.

The good and bad

On the positive side, this new era’s heightened awareness is sure to curb the behaviour of managers who indeed engage in undesirable conduct. Conversely, well-meaning, yet out-of-touch managers might find themselves in serious trouble.

On the HR front, there is good and bad news. In all of the previous examples, HR’s sole role was that of the bad guy — the investigative, punitive force. HR had not been there for these managers in an educational, guiding role that could have prevented the unfortunate outcomes.

The good news is that HR professionals can change course and become sought-after partners who help managers avert the risks facing them.

For example, in the case of the

“touchy” leader, pointing out to him several years earlier that touching is no longer an acceptable practice could have gone a long way. And the death-and-God manager rightfully lamented to me that training focused on appropriate boundaries could have saved her from making an ignorant mistake.

High-sensitivity situations

Previously, I recommended that managers be über-careful in situations that by their very nature might give rise to complaints.

For example, instances where a manager has to closely scrutinize an employee’s poor performance as part of a performance management process are fraught with the risk of the manager being perceived as discriminatory or harassing.

Today, the new frontier focuses on diversity, inclusion and respect issues. Managers should adapt their practices to include and honour the needs of those who are different. They should do so not only because it is the right thing to do; it is also because those who feel mistreated are, in today’s landscape, more likely to launch complaints.

Manager’s survival kit

HR should equip managers with the following advice:

Show you’re learning: Tell your

team you're working to catch up with the times. Encourage them to correct and teach you. This will help you grow. And it will serve you well in case of a complaint.

Practise good hygiene: Demonstrate respect and professionalism at all times. That means keep your conduct squeaky clean. No swearing, no friendly touching, no comments on new haircuts.

Make "civility and inclusion" your motto: Avoid behaviours that could be construed as uncivil or

excluding. Say "Hello" and "Good morning." Never roll your eyes. Treat team members equally.

Understand your location: Your hierarchical authority means you are scrutinized closely by those with less power. Even seemingly insignificant actions could have an immense negative impact and trigger a complaint. Bring this simple reality into focus, and act accordingly.

Update your vocabulary: Educate yourself continuously on phrases and terminology referring

to minorities, disability and gender matters (and why they are important). Be prepared to stretch your language, right down to shifting pronouns from "he-she" to "they."

Learn to apologize: You're human, you will make mistakes. A well-constructed apology will go a long way to mitigating your exposure.

Start at hiring: Ask new hires what they need or want — and what you can do — to make the work environment psychologically and culturally safe for them.

Ask for help: When in doubt, always consult human resources.

Our cultural ship is in the midst of a major course change. Wise managers should hop on board to ensure they remain safe and effective.

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