

The Deblieux Report

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FIVE HARASSMENT QUESTIONS FOR LEADERS

In 1979, Catharine MacKinnon explained sexual harassment in her ground-breaking book, [The Sexual Harassment of Women in the Workplace](#).

Michele Vinson put workplace sexual harassment on the front-page when her case was decided by the Supreme Court on June 9, 1986. Her compelling [story](#) highlighted misconceptions about workplace sexual conduct and managerial power.

Beth Ann Faragher was awarded one-dollar in her lawsuit against the City of Boca Raton, Florida. Her [story](#), along with the compelling experiences of Kimberly Ellerth, Joseph Oncale, Anita Hill, and thousands of others define sexual harassment as we know it today. They helped to establish a framework for discussing, preventing, and addressing workplace harassment.

These real people, with real life experiences taught us something was wrong. Over the years, they helped us write better policies, do more training, create more effective complaint processes, spend more time investigating, and taking decisive action to stop sexual harassment, harassment, discrimination, and abusive conduct.

The Net Effect of their experiences is an enduring series of laws, regulations, HR practices, and legal processes. The resulting “sexual harassment system” represents an investment of millions upon millions of dollars to address and resolve an important issue. Despite the monumental effort, the problem persists.

The dedication to my 1997 book on sexual harassment reads, “This book is dedicated to my very special daughters, Nicole and Danielle, in the hope that the workplace they enter will be free of

the discrimination, harassment, and sexual harassment that permeated my first workplace in 1971.” The June 2016 findings of the [EEOC Select Task Force on the Study of Sexual Harassment in the Workplace](#) conclude we have fallen short of my hope. The rash of recent news confirms the finding.

The current national discussion will surely bring about changes. It will lead to more laws, more regulations, more training, more mandates. It will not be enough. Leaders must lead. You must lead.

First, and Foremost, harassment is a leadership issue. The main job of every workplace leader, in every organization, at every level, is to create an environment where people can do their jobs and do them well. There is no room for discrimination, harassment, sexual harassment, or abusive conduct in such an environment. The test for you as a manager is simple:

When an employee leaves a workplace interaction, are they thinking about:

- A. The disrespectful way they were treated, or,
- B. Contributing to the success of the organization?

If the answer is A, you fail as a manager. If it is B, you are on your way to success.

While the experts examine the complexities of the “system,” you must lead, manage, and supervise. You cannot wait for their findings. You must put your phone on your selfie-stick, set the camera to video, and watch yourself creating a respectful workplace. You must ask if what you are doing is working.

Five Questions must be answered in your leadership video. You cannot assume you already have the answers to them. Rather, you must approach each question with a healthy skepticism. You must challenge your own effectiveness. You may think you are doing okay. You need to be sure. Every recent claim includes a higher-level manager or Board claiming ignorance. You do not want to be one of them. The standard is, “Did you know or should you have known?” In nearly every case, someone “should have known.”

Are my expectations clear?

Harassment, discrimination, and abusive conduct are not about race, sex, religion or other protected classes. They are about respect; respect for each and every individual in the workplace.

No complaint starts with the words, “The law was broken.” Every complaint starts with, “I was not treated with respect.”

The most important step you can take to create a respectful work environment is to define what you mean by respect for your team. When your team knows what you mean by respect, they work to meet your expectation. You can no longer assume people know what you think respect is. You must define it through your own words, actions, and behaviors.

You can start with the test on page one, “I expect every work-related interaction to end with every participant feeling respected and valued for their role on our team.” The words need to be your words. They must be words you believe in. They must be words you are willing to use to hold people accountable.

One easy, effective way to make your expectation known is to devote an entire staff meeting to reviewing your corporate policies on sexual harassment, harassment, discrimination, and abusive conduct. When you sit at the end of the table, with your HR Business Partner at your side, and state unequivocally that the policy is important to you, people listen. When you lead a collaborative, interactive discussion about how it applies to you and your team, your team leaves

believing you believe actions are more important than words on a policy page.

Do my words, actions, behaviors, and decisions support my expectations?

Every management action creates an employee reaction. There are no exceptions. There are no qualifiers. Everything about you, in your role as a leader, communicates a message about who you are and what you value.

Words are 7% of the communicated message. Everything from eye contact to tone; from focus to time spent; from posture and office decorations to the grammar, timing, and sincerity of your e-mails, communicates a message.

Your message, your every message, must demonstrate respect. It must broadcast your commitment to people being valued and included in the process of work and working together.

Simply put, it is your responsibility to set the example. You lead effectively when your words, actions, behaviors, decisions are based on respect and job-related responsibilities. Verbal, visual, and physical sexual behavior interactions are neither. Your language must be inclusive; your actions must be fair; your decisions must be objective in the eyes and hearts of the people you lead.

Do I hear what my team is telling me?

The fact is most managers talk too much. It comes with the territory. When you sit in a leadership chair, you feel like you are supposed to have the answers. You think you have to be right. It makes listening harder.

Here is the [problem](#). The higher up you go in an organization, the more people tell you what they think you want to hear; the less they tell you what you need to hear. You cannot create and maintain respect by doing all the talking; by having all the answers.

You do not create respect when you “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” You create respect when you “do unto others as they would have you do unto them.”

If you expect your team to practice respect, you must listen and listen carefully to what they have to say. You can start with a simple question:

What is one thing I can do to make this a more respectful workplace for you?

Notice the wording, “one thing.” Start small. Do not overwhelm. Listen to the answer. Do not react, respond, or reject. Say, “Help me better understand.” Say, “Thank you.”

Think about the answers you get. Ask yourself what you can do to fulfill each employee’s request. Let them know the outcome of your thought process.

Do I hold myself and others accountable?

Holding people [accountable](#) for their workplace behaviors is one of your most important responsibilities. People are hired to work with other people. The primary purpose of their workplace relationship is productivity. You are responsible, possibly even liable, if you “know or should have known” harassing, discriminatory or abusive behaviors are present in the workplace. You cannot ignore them. You cannot hope they will go away. You must address them. You must stop them and keep them from returning.

In the recent raft of public cases coworkers and people close to the situation were aware of problematic behaviors by perpetrators. The public may have been surprised by the 6:00 o’clock news, but the people in the office were not. You have to wonder where the managers were; why they were not aware of the warning signals; why they did not step in to take action long before the news, the lawsuit, the emotional fallout of allowing it to go on in the first place.

Your employer’s policy is the criteria for accountability. It is not whether “they were just kidding around,” or, “it is just the way they are,” or, “how important they are,” or, any of other tired excuse. Your policy says your employer expects you to prevent harassment, not to make excuses for it. When you know or should know it is there, you have a duty to step in, sometimes immediately; usually after consulting with HR or legal counsel.

Am I continuously learning?

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 initially listed five protected classes – race, sex, religion, national origin, color. The list has doubled, tripled, and, in some cases, quadrupled in individual states. At a minimum, you have a duty to know the list for your state; to understand what you must do to protect the rights afforded to each protected class.

Harassment training is no longer a “check the box” activity for you as a leader. HR should not have to hound you to attend. You must arrive early, with a sharp pencil, and a list of pointed questions. You must actively participate in the learning process.

You lead in an increasingly diverse environment. You must work diligently to understand the diversity of your constituents. Effective leaders understand that what is “normal” for them, may not be “normal” for their constituents. They invest time learning about the “normal” for other people. They watch, they listen, they ask, they learn. They read [articles](#) and [books](#) about diversity. They visit culturally diverse restaurants, theaters, museums. They commit to growing their cultural diversity knowledge as a leadership skill, not as a “hope to do some day when I have time.”

Leadership Is A Full-Time Job. Your main job is to create an opportunity for employee success. Success requires respectful relationships. It requires open, collaborative, supportive interactions.

Respect is a performance competency. No one is hired to work alone. No one is hired to demean, denigrate, or abuse others.

Every job requires working with other people. It is your responsibility to hire, train, coach, and manage your team to meet or exceed your expectation for respectful relationships.

When people feel respected they are engaged; they are creative; they are productive. That is what you get paid to make happen.

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