

Avoiding sexual harassment at work

by *Victoria Pelham* - Aug. 6, 2011 05:20 PM
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Unwanted advances in the workplace can make for an awkward and tense environment. So if you find yourself the recipient of unwanted attention, be up-front right away to avoid further confusion or potential sexual harassment, says Amy Lieberman, mediator and executive director of Insight Employment Mediation LLC in Phoenix.

Steps to help curb unwanted attention include:

- Asking the co-worker to stop right away.

Be honest and explain that you're not interested. Don't avoid the topic by saying you're busy on a night you've been asked out or laughing at a joke that you find offensive. Stay polite, but be direct to make sure a co-worker understands the advances are unwanted.

- Asking human resources to intervene.

If you're not comfortable approaching a co-worker and the unwanted advances continue, consult the human-resources team or a manager.

Remember that sexual-harassment laws and company policies are in place to protect employees. Human-resources departments investigate claims once you file a complaint and can help resolve the situation by taking

appropriate measures. Contact them as soon as possible.

"The best thing to do is to get help from somebody else in the company and not feel like you're alone and you have to handle it alone," Lieberman says.

- Try to get space between you and the person offering the unwanted attention.

Easing tension in the workplace between you and someone who has approached you can be as simple as getting some space. Speak to those in command about switching your desk or projects or even taking a few days off. Explaining why you're making the request will likely put the wheels in motion at work to address the issue, because companies can be sued if they know an employee is being harassed and they don't make an effort to eradicate the behavior.

- Request sexual-harassment training or a company policy.


If there has been no training about appropriate conduct in the workplace, sexual harassment and the difference between unwanted and wanted advances,

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then you can request training on the issue to clear the air and educate co-workers. You can also request a company policy if there isn't one already in place.

"Really you want to open up the communication and give people a chance to act, give people a chance to prevent and a chance to resolve," Lieberman says.

- Document the incidents.

Record unwanted advances in writing immediately after they happen, because your human-resources department will need specifics in case the behavior leads to a sexual-harassment suit. Detailed notes also help highlight the difference between flirtation and sexual harassment by demonstrating the severity and pervasiveness of the advances, as well as their ability to change the workplace environment.

"Document what's happening, but don't document and hide it. Document to share it," Lieberman says.

Tyler Allen, an employment attorney at Tyler Allen Law Firm PLLC in Phoenix, reiterates the importance of detailed notes. Specifics are important, such as the times, places and if there were any witnesses. He says this is important for your own protection in the future even if you don't bring a complaint to the attention of managers.

Both Allen and Lieberman say that the most important point is to address the unwanted advances right away.

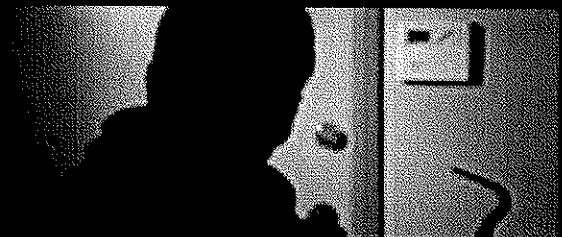
"I know a lot of people who don't want to rock the boat," Allen says. "But it's really important to address it early on and not let something get out of hand."

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