

Business Articles: Avoiding Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment lawsuits are a growing threat to companies. Kari Fischer Uman, a senior associate with Executive Coaching & Consulting Associates, offers these suggestions to companies who want to address and prevent the problem:

Behave as you want others to behave.

If employees see senior managers behaving respectfully toward others, they will too.

Have a policy.

This should include a definition of sexual harassment with statutes cited, examples of harassment, an explanation of complaint procedures, sanctions, and a description of managers' responsibilities. Provide a process for answering questions or airing concerns.

Human resources personnel should be training. You also may want to establish a formal complaint process and an informal one where everyone, including someone inquiring about their own behavior, can ask questions.

Take quick action.

Investigate allegations and respond with sanctions if necessary. People will be watching to gauge your response.

Train.

Management and all staff should know what is and isn't sexual harassment and how to handle it if it happens. Role-playing can help.

No alcohol.

It's best to keep drinking away from company functions.

Provide guidance on office romance.

Let people know what is OK and what's not OK.

Source: Executive Coaching & Consulting Associates, Washington, DC, July 17, 1998