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# **HARASSMENT: The Problem That Will Not Die and Why**

**by Lynne Eisaguirre**

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“I wanted to get to the root of this problem,” the manager sighed heavily.

“We’ve had three major investigations, training, reprimands, discipline and nothing works. In fact, the problem just keeps getting worse.”

The engineer manager of an electric utility service center looked tired—and no wonder. He was currently scheduled to testify in two sexual harassment cases and his division had just completed an investigation into allegations of harassment and discrimination against Hispanics. Most recently, two women in non-traditional jobs—one of whom had obtained a settlement in yet another lawsuit years ago—insisted that the problems persisted. Other men in the same workgroup had recently complained that their co-workers had put a dead squirrel in their locker and another complained of co-workers urinating into his water bottle.

“They all act like children,” the manager complained. “But they won’t stop and they won’t talk to me. I don’t know what to do other than fire the whole group and start over!”

As any HR practitioner knows, this is the point at which you try to slow him down so that he doesn’t act on his threat and yet fixing this situation involves, a substantial commitment, not a quick solution which is what the manager wants.

The problem is not that the company has not reacted properly to allegation of harassment and discrimination—in fact they have—but the manager is now dealing with the aftermath of that intervention and the predictable resentment of a workgroup that's been investigated and accused too many times.

What this manager and most HR professionals fail to do is to understand the aftermath of these situations and take specific steps to engage in what I call Team Re-Building.

Investigations, lawsuits, complaints about harassment and discrimination are a part of most workplaces. Whether this it is a sign that we have become more appropriately reactive to these situations or whether there is actually more of this kind of behavior is something experts constantly debate. Yet what remains true is that we're on a collision course between good people management and the long arm of the law. We have to take these allegations seriously and investigate, discipline and train and yet the interventions themselves can create new problems and long-time simmering resentment.

When these things occur, the entire work group is disrupted. The alleged recipient of harassment and discrimination may face further abuse because he or she is viewed as a “tattler” or “stool pigeon.” The alleged harasser feels a natural human resentment and shame of being accused—even if they did nothing. The witnesses and even casual observers are often not informed about what happened

and why. Yet the workplace grapevine works quite effectively and so the rumor mill goes into overtime—usually creating new and wild rumors that are even worse than the truth. While trying to rebuild a team that had been shattered by a sexual harassment investigation, for example, I was told by one employee that he had heard that a man was fired for smiling at a woman.

Left to their own devices, the team becomes dysfunctional: new harassment, polarization and discrimination ramps up. The frustrated managers and HR practitioners decide that the problem is systematic and wonder what to do. Usually, their hands are tied by well-meaning attorneys, who tell them not to talk to anyone in the workplace about the investigation or the results for fear of defamation or violation of privacy claims.

In this situation, just walking away after the investigation or lawsuit is over will not work. Specific processes need to be put in place to rebuild a shattered team. **Why Do We Still Face These Issues?** Before we address those issues, I want to explain why we have found harassment and discrimination to be so pervasive, especially in workplaces that have been traditionally male and/or traditionally white. Both social psychologists and cultural anthropologists have identified interesting clues. One is that the studies that look at initiation rituals among indigenous tribes. The other comes from universities who have tried to stamp out the worst of fraternity hazing—only to find that it goes underground,

becomes more secrete and creates even more problems. A third theory comes out of the military which has historically forced recruits to go through a difficult form of basic training before being admitted to more advanced services.

These initiation rituals form a useful purpose in social bonding. When someone has gone through—and survived these rituals both their loyalty to the group and their group's cohesiveness is enhanced. The harassment of women or people of color when they're integrated into traditional workgroups is similar to the hazing or initiation rituals for any newcomer. The problem is that for women and people of color the behavior tends to focus on how they are different—their gender, color or ethnicity. The recipients understandably react and the hazing escalates resulting in predictable disasters.

The problem with just trying to formulate policies, conduct training and investigate complaints—what most organizations have been doing for the past 15-20 years is that it overlooks the real human need and benefit of hazing rituals. What is required is not just to forbid such rituals altogether but to replace them—as one step in the team rebuilding process—with something more acceptable, legal and productive. Just coming down with rules, threats and strict legal policies has the predictable effect of driving the behavior underground, polarizing the workgroup and further isolating the targets. The targets then feel isolation and resentment and decide that they're being harassed or discriminated against again.

They bring forward new complaints, prompting new investigations and the vicious cycle starts again.

How do we break the cycle and re-build a broken team? Follow these steps:

1. Look toward healing and rebuilding during the investigations. Take care that the investigators do not use an interrogation model of questioning, that they explain what they're doing and why and that they ask everyone involved how they want the matter to be resolved. You should ask these questions. Not because you're going to automatically do what they want, but because you need to be able to manage people's expectations about the process.
2. Control rumors.
3. Explain—in a sanitized version—the what, why and how of the investigation, lawsuit and/or complaint and its results.
4. Review policies and procedures, identify other training/coaching and management needs. Conduct a management audit.
5. Find out what specific behaviors the participants need to work with each other in the future.
6. Identify opportunities to work together against a common enemy or problem.
7. Engage the team in identifying new, meaningful initiation rituals, celebrations and events.
8. Follow-up—one month, three months, six months, one year—at a minimum.