Healing the Workplace

by Lynne Eisaguirre

More and more we find that HR professionals miss a critical step after they have completed a sexual harassment or other workplace investigation: healing the workplace.

You have a dozen employees in a close-knit, young sales group. They love after-hours dinners and dancing. Sales soar, but then five women complain of sexual harassment by two of your top male producers. The women claim unwelcome touching, requests for dates and harassing phone calls. The sales manager—despite your management training that stresses HR should investigate these claims—decides to do his own investigations, creating rampant rumors and hard feelings. Two groups have formed along gender lines: one supporting the alleged harassers and one supporting the alleged recipients.

You conduct your own investigation and decide that the claims have merit. Management accepts your recommendation for discipline of the two males, and you heave a sigh of relief that you can now go on to the next crises. Right?

All wrong. More and more we find that HR professionals miss a critical step after they have completed a sexual harassment or other workplace investigation: healing the workplace. (The above scenario is based upon an actual case where we were asked to come in and help the workgroup heal.)

When we train professionals on how to conduct sexual harassment and other discrimination investigations, we make certain that they plan for healing and conflict resolution. We must take the time to realize that these incidents are often the tip of the iceberg of management problems in any area and that the investigation itself has strained relationships between employees. Conflict resolution is needed. At a minimum, healing should include the following steps:

1. Identify additional training needs. These may include sexual harassment, diversity, team building, assertiveness or management training.

2. Meet again with those involved in the investigation. Talk with the alleged recipient, the alleged harasser or discriminator and the manager. How did they feel about the way you conducted the investigation? What do they need now to work effectively as a team and as individuals?

3. Consider addressing the workgroup. When we do work with companies after a big blow-up, this is the most controversial area. Often, corporate counsel does not want the rest of the workgroup to know anything about the investigation for fear of defamation or privacy claims. Yet the rumors are frequently much worse than the truth. At a minimum, inform the group that you had a claim of sexual harassment or whatever, conducted an investigation—as required by the law and your company’s policy—and took appropriate action. Some companies even reveal that merit was or was not found so that they let people know that their policy has teeth. Be sure to review the way the company handles investigations and explain why, using a hypothetical situation.

We have found that this step provides an excellent opportunity for HR professionals to educate the group about how they operate. Confidentiality, for example, is often misunderstood. Even witnesses may be angry. Some employees assume that no one other than the interviewer will be told of their statements; others fail to comprehend why they can’t know everything about the investigation.

We suggest that you use someone other than the investigator for this process. Your own organizational development department or an outside source with trained facilitators may be able to help.

Taking the time to heal the workplace accomplishes several goals: you allow people to move on from the disruption of the investigation and return their attention to the job, educate the department about the underlying issue and your own work, and often, discover new issues. Finally, you will receive valuable feedback about your own skills as an investigator and the way your department is perceived by employees and management.

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