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Fear of Not Knowing How to Respond to an Insensitive Comment or Conduct at Work (Supervisors Won't Know What To Do Because They Aren't Experts in Human Rights)

There are many workplace challenges facing Canadians. From observations while working in the field of workplace and community human rights over many years, Stephen Hammond has chosen what he considers the top 10. This video transcript is intended to start a dialogue. If you feel it may help your workplace or your association, please use it. Print out the text, have a discussion, and try to come to resolutions that can be helpful to your group. The best way to deal with workplace challenges is to talk about them in a respectful way. If you would like to access the video that goes with the transcript, it can be purchased at HumanRightsTrainingStore.com

Workplace human rights issues pop up everywhere. Sometimes they're subtle. Other times not so subtle. Supervisors and others in the workplace don't have to be experts in human rights to address these issues. In fact, relying on common sense will go a long way.

You hear a comment from an employee suggesting women don't belong in this particular male-dominated workplace. Or someone says at coffee that First Nations people aren't paying their fair share of taxes. Or another person says he's got nothing against gay men, but he doesn't want any close to his children.

What's a supervisor to do?

Many workplace leaders tell me they don't always feel comfortable tackling issues that seem outside their responsibility or area of expertise. Such, an obvious and outrageous comment from one employee to another can be dealt with relatively easily – often because someone will complain about the comment or the person. But what do you do with simple opinions, or comments that aren't that straight forward?

First off, there's more responsibility to deal with a number of issues at work, including the three I just noted. Harassment, or various forms of discrimination are the responsibility of an employer and that responsibility extends right down to the first layer of management. If you supervise, in the eyes of the human rights process, they often look at you in the same way they look at the CEO or head of your organization: one continuous layer of management.

Second, don't think you have to have all the "expert" knowledge to deal with workplace issues. If you clue in that something is wrong, but you're not sure what exactly is wrong, ask a few questions, or talk to a colleague and perhaps it will become clear.

Third, do something. These days, organizations get into trouble because they don't think anything is wrong, or they don't hear anyone complaining right then and there. If you hear something a reasonable person might find troubling, then a workplace leader has the legal responsibility to correct a problem, before it gets out of hand.

Let's take the three examples I started with. Do you have to know everything about feminist theory to tackle an insensitive comment about women? Do you need to have a deep understanding of First Nation treaties to make an Aboriginal person feel comfortable? Do you have to know all the statistics about pedophiles before standing up for gay men, or lesbians in your workplace? I highly doubt it.

In fact there are plenty of times where getting sucked into certain conversations just makes matters worse. If you want to refute wrong conversations, feel free to do so, but there are plenty of times where you can just say, "I don't want to hear those kinds of comments" or "this isn't up for debate. If you want to say these things on your time, away from work, that's your business, but not on my shift."

In each of my three examples, you could reply the same thing to all of them. "How would a woman, or an Aboriginal person, or a gay man, feel, if they heard you saying those things?" If the person replies, "I don't care," you can reply, "well I do and I don't want to hear that kind of comment again."

There are times, where a comment didn't personally affect me and so it didn't register with me as being insensitive. But when the person affected let me know how it affected him or her, then I had to speak up. Don't think you have to know everything that affects every person, but be prepared to either ask questions, or simply say you want a change in behaviour over certain comments.

What do you think?

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