

Ho-Ho-Hold it Right There: Event Planning in the Wake of #MeToo

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Three in ten. That's how many people have reported experiencing sexual harassment in the workforce according to a November 2017 survey by the Canadian Federal Government^[1]. What we can safely assume is that the number of people actually experiencing sexual harassment in the workplace is even higher. The #metoo movement has brought the longstanding issue of sexual harassment in the workplace to the forefront where it is finally getting the recognition it deserves. The need for employers to acknowledge the issue and take proactive steps to educate and protect its workforce has never been more apparent.

Employers have an obligation to keep their employees safe in the workplace. That priority applies to physical and psychological safety during, and potentially after, working hours. One of the most vulnerable times for this safe environment to fall by the wayside is at the annual holiday party. Across the country, while social committees are meeting to plan the fun and games, HR leaders should be taking the necessary steps to protect their organization's employees before, during and after the party takes place.

Step 1 - Policies & Training

The first priority for every business is to ensure their policies on sexual harassment are up to date. Policies are the roadmap for letting employees know how they must conduct themselves in the workplace, and what will happen if they fail to act accordingly. These updated policies should specify what is considered sexual harassment. In Alberta, the legislation makes it clear that harassment includes single or repeated incidents of objectionable or unwelcome conduct, comment, or bullying by a person who knows, or ought to know, their behaviour may cause offence, humiliation or health and safety concerns to another employee.^[2] When these behaviours are sexual in nature, they constitute sexual harassment. Put simply, sexual harassment is unwanted sexual behaviour directed by one person toward another.^[3]

Employees should receive training on what constitutes sexual harassment. But don't stop there. The training should also cover how to make complaints, how the company will respond to complaints and what the potential disciplinary actions might be for violations of the sexual harassment policy. Having the investigation and disciplinary process embedded in the policy will help ensure consistency in how these matters are handled. It should also be emphasized to employees that these policies may apply outside of regular working hours and outside of the workplace.

Connecting all these points in a training session will help demonstrate to employees that the

company is taking the issue seriously. Simply having employees read and sign the policy is unlikely to make the same kind of impact.

Step 2 - Planning the Party

There are several precautionary steps companies can take to minimize the potential risk of harassment occurring at the annual holiday party. Top of the list is eliminating or reducing the focus on alcohol at the event. Team building events and activities like going to an escape room, go-karting or even hatchet throwing, can provide fun and memorable options for an alcohol-free event.

If alcohol is being served, it is a good idea to have some sort of entertainment or activity to keep people engaged instead of standing around drinking. Examples include group games, like trivia, or a performance, like an improv group, magician or a band. Food is also a must. Allocating drink tickets can also help keep everyone's consumption under control. Lastly, planning ahead to ensure that everyone has a safe ride home is another must if alcohol is served. Taxi chits are a small price to pay for everyone's safety.

Step 3 - At the Party

When the event gets going, there needs to be someone in charge that can keep an eye on things and monitor alcohol consumption. If inappropriate behavior is spotted or is brought to this individual's attention, they need to be prepared to take action and intervene. These actions can include removing the person in question and arranging their transportation home if alcohol is involved.

Step 4 – After the Party

Your updated sexual harassment policies should detail how complaints will be handled. Consistency in handling complaints is key to encouraging employees to report inappropriate conduct. Employees need to have faith in the system and confidence that issues will be handled fairly and promptly in order for the policy to work.

One important decision that must be made early in the process is who will investigate. It is beneficial to use an experienced, third party investigator. This is especially true if the complaint involves a managerial employee or a member of the HR department. Steps should be taken during the investigation phase to reduce or eliminate contact between the person bringing the complaint and the accused, such as changing shifts or office locations. In more serious cases, suspending staff from work while the investigation is taking place may be the best route. Your policy should specify whether these suspensions are with or without pay. As employees may be suspended or restricted during an investigation, it is critical that complaints be addressed swiftly, and investigations be conducted promptly.

Your policy should also detail how anyone found to have violated the policies will be dealt with. This includes the steps in the disciplinary process ranging from verbal and written warnings, to sensitivity or other training, to termination of employment. The policy and training should make it clear that steps in the disciplinary process can be skipped if warranted by the seriousness of the infraction.

Conclusion

From lawsuits, to low staff morale and loss of reputation, the consequences to the company of failing to proactively address the issue of workplace harassment are growing. Creating a work culture that is respectful and safe for all employees is important for a business and its staff. Clear policies and thoughtful event planning will enable everyone involved to have a safe and enjoyable experience at all corporate social events.

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[1] <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/services/health-safety/reports/workplace-harassment-sexual-violence.html>.

[2] *Occupational Health and Safety Act*, SA 2017, c O-2.1, s. 1(q).

[3] https://www.albertahumanrights.ab.ca/publications/bulletins_sheets_booklets/sheets/hr_and_employment/Pages/sexual_harassment.aspx