



Enhancing Human Capital: Harassment in Our Workplace

January 15, 2019 [Cassi Fields, PhD; Randy Langsam, LHRM](#)

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Sexual harassment, one type of abuse, is a prominent and prevalent topic these days. This article focuses on all types of harassment, both sexual and other. However, we remind our readers that on-the-job abuse also includes all types of bullying and discrimination.

Recall the four dynamic work environments defined in [Enhancing Fire-Rescue Human Capital: The Four Dynamics of the Fire Service](#):

- The Emergency Incident (EI)
- The Station/Business Office (O)
- The Domestic/Family Life (D)
- The Public Exchange (PE)

We have talked about how to become aware of these environments and how to adjust our behavior in each. We talked about leadership in each of these environments, and we touched on how our emotions change in each. This article dives deeper into those emotions, particularly those resulting in and from peer or supervisory harassment.

Can your employees turn their emotions on and off quickly when they move through each of the work environments? Do they have mechanisms in place to deal with those feelings of what just happened during the emergency incident (EI) or what just happened in the O, D or PE? What do they do with those emotions?

Are they OK or do they take those emotions out on others and harass coworkers? Do they accept the harassment of others as a punishment for their own work or feelings of self-worth? Or do they just turn a blind eye to everything and hope it goes away?

Do you know?

Essentially, these emotions and the ways we have been brought up may cause our service members to emote in ways that are not necessarily logical, that is, with harassment.

There are four parties involved in all types of harassment. They are the harasser, the victim, the bystander and the one who intervenes. The intervener stops the immediate situation from continuing and possibly escalating but is also instrumental in preventing future harassment.

To make a change to an environment that includes on-the-job harassment, we need to educate our members about the four work dynamics and the types of harassment, and we need to explain how harassment emerges in and from each of our work environments. We need to openly work with situations and persons involved and fix our culture. We need to better understand where those feelings and emotions emanate from. Only then can we evaluate their motives and discuss the best strategies for change.

Let's review the four parties involved in harassment:

- The Harasser, aka the bully, the discriminator
- The Victim, aka the harassed
- The Bystander, aka the one who sees, hears and knows all but does nothing
- The One Who Intervenes, aka the stopper, the one that steps in to stop the trend of harassment. This person may file a report or verbally make a stand to protect the victim or more.

Think about how your members would describe their feelings about harassment in general and specifically after stressful or emotional situations in the workplace. How would *you* describe them and how would you think they would describe themselves?

As leaders, we need to think how our employees would answer those questions. Would they recognize if they are harassers? Probably not, but they may describe themselves as the one who is tough, who manages by "do as I say, not as I do."

Others may say they are the one who "dismisses others input and belittles them," who only considers the input of some and ignores others, who laughs at others, who labels groups of people, who has a predisposition to dislike others who are not similar to him or her, and who gets away with abusing others and never gets called out!

Would coworkers say that others go along with their jokes and antics, so called, because if they don't, they feel they would be ridiculed and harassed themselves? Would they say they fear their job may be in jeopardy because they don't have the same rank or status?

The harasser isn't going to stop harassing. Why should they? Who's stopping them? Do they even know they're actually harassing or bullying a coworker or is it a part of their DNA that has never been stopped?

Would any of your service members say that they are being *harassed*? Even if they ever said it to a friend or confidant, would they report it? They may truly believe that they are good person and a great firefighter, but as a newer member, a smaller in stature member, a different gender, a transient, or other, they know that it makes them a target for being harassed! Are they thinking that their best strategy is to just "take it" and stay silent or laugh along with their comrades, trying to fit in, but being picked on, harassed and bullied every day?

The Victim, the Harassed, may have been a victim of harassment their whole life. On the other hand, they may have never been openly harassed until now. In either case, they may likely be an accomplished equal but don't feel that way or get treated that way. They accept the abuse and feel more inadequate and abused every day. They are likely very confused by the situation they find themselves in.

Or is your workforce made up of Bystanders? They see all and know all, but do nothing about it? Do they want to say something but don't want to get involved so they just let it continue? Do they know what is happening but prefer the status quo?

The Bystander may say "What does any of it matter anyway, it's not me! It's probably not that bad." Or they may be afraid to lose status with their coworkers if they speak up. Maybe they harbor concerns about being forced into the unpopular group. But when and if tragedy strikes, like a suicide, how would your members feel then? How would they feel if they knew they could have done something to prevent it and didn't?

In an ideal world, your members would feel like if there was harassment occurring in the system, it would be addressed, including all four involved parties. They would say they work in a caring and supportive environment whose leader exemplifies this.

Most importantly, they would say that their chief stands up for his/her emergency service members even when it may be difficult to do so?

Interveners are strong, confident and unafraid of the consequences of taking action. A work environment that supports interveners is one in which the consequences of taking action to help coworkers in trouble is rewarded.

As we have stated in previous articles, "Since the beginning of the fire and emergency service, members have told anyone who'll listen, 'We're different than any other job on earth.'" This holds true due to the four dynamic environments in which we work. But today, we need to look at the other dynamics a bit closer in terms of emotions and potential abuse. The anticipation, hesitation, disappointment, loss, anger, elation and so many more emotions come out in your specific work environment and those emotions cannot be turned on and off as quickly as others would like to think. Those emotions that make a fire service member run towards danger to help others also need their own outlets to release those feelings.

Harassment, bullying, discrimination and other forms of abuse are happening here and now, in every part of our world and culture. We need to stop it.

The only way this all works is if everyone has a personal willingness to grow in their own self-awareness, and with a desire for training and with consent to change the current culture. We need to be open to understanding others and do more than tolerate individual differences – we need the desire to positively promote them.

We can stop the harassment, protect the victim and instill confidence in the bystander to take action. We can create a better and stronger fire and emergency service whose new and existing members feel safe.

There is much more to discuss and consider:

- How to help victims get help and report their abuse without retaliation and without fear of embarrassment
- How to develop bystander behavior into intervening behavior that is supported by law and by the department
- How to teach the harasser to modify his/her behavior and emotions
- How to behave in each of our four dynamic environments when harassment occurs

We have the training methodology. We just need to implement it.

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For Sexual Harassment in the Workplace Training, contact RSL Employee Consulting, a Division of RSL Healthcare Consulting, LLC at 561-213-5125 or Info@RSLHCC.com. Please visit our website at www.RSLHCC.com to learn more about our company.



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