



# Sexual Harassment Prevention: What Every Employee Should Know

*Why Workplace Training Matters and How Everyone Can Help Prevent Harassment*

## A Respectful Workplace Doesn't Happen by Accident

Most employees have encountered some form of workplace training. Sometimes it involves safety procedures, computer security, or company policies. Other times, it addresses a subject that can be uncomfortable to discuss: sexual harassment.

It's tempting to regard harassment-prevention training as just another mandatory presentation or online course. After all, shouldn't adults already understand that unwanted sexual advances, offensive remarks, and intimidation have no place at work?

Unfortunately, workplace harassment remains a persistent problem. As discussed in our companion article, **Sexual Harassment at Work: Know Your Rights**, federal employment law provides important protections against unlawful harassment and discrimination. But laws alone cannot guarantee a respectful working environment. Prevention requires education, effective leadership, accountability, and a workplace culture that values professional conduct.

## Why Harassment Often Goes Unreported

One of the most troubling findings in the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's (EEOC) 2016 Select Task Force report was that many employees who experience harassment never formally report it. Instead, they may avoid the harasser, minimize the behavior, or simply endure the situation.

Why would someone remain silent? Fear is often a factor. Employees may worry about losing their jobs, damaging their careers, being labeled troublemakers, or becoming the subjects of workplace gossip. Others may believe that reporting harassment will accomplish nothing, particularly when the person responsible holds a position of authority.

These concerns help explain why the number of formal complaints cannot tell the whole story. A workplace with few reported incidents is not necessarily free from harassment. Employees must believe that reporting misconduct is safe and that their concerns will be taken seriously.

## What Harassment-Prevention Training Should Accomplish

Effective training should do more than explain the law or require employees to acknowledge that they've read a company policy. Its primary purpose should be to help people recognize inappropriate conduct, understand professional boundaries, and develop the confidence to respond when problems arise.

Training is most effective when it uses realistic situations rather than abstract legal definitions. Employees should be encouraged to discuss how seemingly harmless jokes, unwanted personal attention, or inappropriate electronic messages can affect their coworkers. They should also learn how to recognize situations in which someone feels pressured to tolerate conduct because of workplace relationships or differences in authority.

An effective program should accomplish four objectives:

- **Increase awareness.** Help employees recognize conduct that is inappropriate, intimidating, or potentially unlawful.
- **Encourage responsible behavior.** Reinforce professional boundaries, mutual respect, and consideration for coworkers.
- **Explain available resources.** Make certain employees understand their organization's policies, reporting procedures, and sources of assistance.
- **Promote accountability.** Establish clear expectations and demonstrate that inappropriate conduct will be addressed consistently.

The goal is not simply to teach employees how to avoid lawsuits. It is to encourage the everyday behavior that makes harassment less likely to occur in the first place.

## Prevention Begins With Leadership

The EEOC's Select Task Force emphasized that organizational leadership plays a critical role in preventing harassment. Employees pay attention not only to what managers say but also to what they do.

When supervisors take complaints seriously, follow workplace policies, and hold employees accountable, they reinforce expectations for professional conduct. When managers dismiss inappropriate behavior or excuse influential employees from following the rules, they undermine those expectations.

Anyone familiar with military leadership will recognize the principle: the conduct and priorities of those in command help establish the standards followed throughout an organization. Commanders who demonstrate a personal commitment to discipline, fairness, and professionalism generally inspire those qualities in their subordinates.

The same principle applies in civilian workplaces. Employees are more likely to respect organizational standards when they see those standards consistently practiced by the people in charge.

## **Changing Workplace Attitudes and Expectations**

Workplace culture develops over time through shared experiences, traditions, and informal expectations. Unfortunately, some organizations develop habits that tolerate offensive humor, exclusionary behavior, or the misuse of authority.

Employees who have spent years in such environments may not recognize that certain conduct is inappropriate. They may regard offensive remarks as harmless joking or dismiss complaints as evidence that someone lacks a sense of humor.

Education can challenge these attitudes by encouraging employees to consider how their behavior affects others. What one person considers amusing may be humiliating or intimidating to someone else. Recognizing that distinction is an important part of professional maturity.

Training should also emphasize that standards of respectful conduct apply equally to everyone. The objective is not to restrict ordinary workplace friendships or harmless social interaction, but to establish reasonable boundaries that protect employees from unwelcome behavior.

## **What Can Coworkers Do to Prevent Harassment?**

Employees sometimes assume that preventing harassment is exclusively a management responsibility. Yet coworkers can influence workplace behavior through their own actions and their willingness to support others.

Suppose an employee repeatedly makes offensive remarks about a coworker during lunch breaks. Others may laugh politely, remain silent, or attempt to change the subject. Unfortunately, silence can sometimes be interpreted as approval, allowing the behavior to continue.

Coworkers who recognize inappropriate conduct can help by refusing to participate, expressing

disapproval when it is safe to do so, or offering support to the affected employee. They may also bring concerns to an appropriate supervisor or human resources representative.

This approach, often called *bystander intervention*, encourages employees to recognize that they can help prevent misconduct even when they are not personally targeted. Effective training provides practical examples of how to intervene safely and constructively.

## **Why Policies Alone Are Not Enough**

Most established organizations have written policies prohibiting sexual harassment. Many also provide complaint procedures, employee handbooks, and periodic training. These measures are important, but their existence does not necessarily demonstrate that the workplace is free from harassment.

Consider an organization that requires annual training but routinely ignores complaints against high-performing employees. Its written policies may appear impressive, yet its actual practices communicate that some individuals are exempt from the rules.

Accountability requires consistent enforcement, regardless of an employee's seniority, popularity, or professional accomplishments. It also requires management to evaluate whether prevention efforts are working rather than assuming that completing a training program solves the problem.

Employees should be able to trust that organizational policies represent genuine commitments rather than paperwork intended primarily to satisfy legal requirements.

## **Creating a Culture of Mutual Respect**

Sexual harassment prevention is part of a broader responsibility to maintain a professional and inclusive workplace. Employees perform better when they can concentrate on their responsibilities without worrying about humiliation, intimidation, or unwanted personal attention.

Building that environment requires continuing attention. New employees join the organization, supervisors change, and workplace relationships evolve. Training, communication, and consistent leadership help reinforce expectations over time.

There is also an important distinction between compliance and commitment. Compliance means following established rules because the organization or the law requires it. Commitment means recognizing that respectful treatment is worthwhile in its own right.

Organizations that achieve both are better positioned to maintain employee confidence, strengthen teamwork, and address problems before they become serious.

# Everyone Has a Part to Play

Sexual harassment prevention cannot succeed through regulations, employee handbooks, or occasional training sessions alone. Those measures establish a foundation, but the real test occurs in everyday interactions among supervisors, coworkers, and employees.

Leadership sets the example, training establishes expectations, and accountability reinforces them. Employees contribute by respecting professional boundaries, supporting coworkers, and refusing to normalize inappropriate behavior.

**A respectful workplace begins with leadership, but it succeeds only when everyone accepts responsibility for maintaining it.**

*Editor's Note: Originally published December 9, 2017, and substantially revised for 2026. For a discussion of unlawful sexual harassment, employee rights, and reporting procedures, see the companion article, **Sexual Harassment at Work: Know Your Rights**. Federal, state, and local requirements may differ.*