Handling Harassment Complaints with Care: A Guide for HR Leaders



Addressing harassment complaints is one of the most sensitive and high-stakes responsibilities for workplace managers. The way a complaint is handled can significantly impact employee trust, psychological safety, and organisational culture. A thoughtful, empathetic, and structured approach is essential not only to ensure fairness, but to support all parties involved and maintain a respectful workplace.

Understanding the Stakes

Harassment complaints often involve complex interpersonal dynamics, power imbalances, and emotional distress. Employees who come forward may feel vulnerable or fearful of retaliation, while those accused may feel anxious, defensive, or concerned about reputational harm.

For HR leaders, the goal is to balance fairness, confidentiality, and empathy, while ensuring compliance with workplace policies and applicable legislation. A poorly handled complaint can escalate conflict, damage morale, and expose the organisation to legal risk.

First Response: Setting the Tone

The initial response to a complaint sets the foundation for the entire process.

Key priorities include:

- Listen without interruption or judgement.
- Acknowledge the concern seriously.
- Avoid making assumptions or conclusions.
- Explain next steps clearly.

Supportive language matters. For example:

- “Thank you for bringing this forward. I understand this may not have been easy.”
- “Our priority is to ensure a safe and respectful workplace for everyone.”
- “We will review this carefully and keep you informed of the process.”

Avoid language that minimises or dismisses the concern, such as:

- “Are you sure it was intentional?”
- “This sounds like a misunderstanding.”

Even well-intended comments can make the complainant feel invalidated.

Best Steps for Addressing a Complaint

A consistent, transparent process helps ensure fairness and reduces the risk of bias.

1. **Document the Complaint Thoroughly**
   Record details accurately, including dates, times, locations, and any witnesses. Use the employee’s own words where possible.
2. **Assess Immediate Risk**
   Determine whether interim measures are needed to protect those involved (e.g., schedule changes, temporary reassignment). These actions should not be punitive.
3. **Maintain Confidentiality**
   Limit information sharing to those directly involved in the investigation. Reinforce expectations around privacy with all parties.
4. **Conduct a Fair and Neutral Investigation**
   - Interview all relevant parties separately.
   - Ask open-ended, non-leading questions.
   - Avoid expressing opinions during interviews.
   - Ensure the investigator is impartial (internal or external).
5. **Keep Communication Ongoing**
   Provide updates to both the complainant and respondent. Silence can increase anxiety and mistrust.
6. **Evaluate Findings Objectively**
   Base conclusions on evidence, not assumptions or personal impressions. Apply organisational policies consistently.

Using Neutral and Inclusive Language

Language plays a critical role in maintaining fairness and preventing further harm.

Best practices include:

- Refer to individuals as “the complainant” and “the respondent” rather than assigning labels.
- Focus on behaviours, not character.
- Use neutral phrasing such as “It has been reported that…” rather than “You did…”
- Avoid emotionally charged or accusatory language.

For example:

- Instead of: “You made inappropriate comments,”
  Use: “Concerns were raised regarding comments that may not align with workplace standards.”

This approach helps reduce defensiveness and keeps the focus on facts.

Avoiding the Perception of Targeting

One of the most common risks in harassment investigations is making individuals feel singled out or unfairly treated.

To mitigate this:

- Apply policies consistently across all employees.
- Clearly explain the process to both parties.
- Avoid unnecessary visibility (e.g., discreet meeting arrangements).
- Ensure interim measures do not appear punitive to either party.
- Train managers to avoid speculation or gossip within teams.

Transparency about process, not outcomes, helps reinforce fairness without breaching confidentiality.

Resolving the Complaint

Resolution will depend on the findings of the investigation and may include:

- Formal disciplinary action (if policy violations are confirmed).
- Mediation or facilitated discussions (where appropriate).
- Training or coaching to address behavioural concerns.
- Policy or workplace adjustments to prevent recurrence.

Regardless of the outcome, it is important to close the loop with both parties. While specific details may be limited, employees should understand that the matter was taken seriously and addressed appropriately.

Supporting Employees After the Process

The impact of a harassment complaint does not end when the investigation concludes.

Post-resolution support may include:

- Offering access to employee assistance programmes (EAPs).
- Checking in regularly with affected employees.
- Monitoring the workplace for signs of retaliation or ongoing tension.
- Reinforcing expectations around respectful behaviour across the team.

Rebuilding trust and psychological safety is a critical part of moving forward.

Strengthening the Workplace Going Forward

Each complaint is also an opportunity to improve organisational practices.

HR directors should consider:

- Reviewing and updating harassment policies.
- Providing regular training on respectful workplace behaviour.
- Equipping managers with skills to handle concerns early.
- Promoting a culture where employees feel safe speaking up.

A proactive approach can reduce the likelihood of future incidents and demonstrate organisational commitment to a safe and inclusive workplace.

Moving Forward with Care and Accountability

Handling harassment complaints requires empathy, clarity, and professionalism at every stage. By focusing on fair processes, thoughtful communication, and ongoing support, HR leaders can ensure that all employees feel respected and protected.

Ultimately, a workplace that responds to concerns with care is one that fosters trust, accountability, and long-term organisational health.