

When Customers Bully and Harass Your Employees



In how many ways can issues of workplace harassment and bullying impact your organization? In more ways than you may first consider.

Within the Canadian workplace there are many layers to workplace harassment and bullying. We more commonly hear reference to the experience of employees being harassed or bullied by co-workers or supervisors/managers. Yet employees also frequently experience bullying or harassment from customers, suppliers and vendors that will require the organization's intervention.

Canadian legislation requires organizations to be prepared to address harassment and bullying in the workplace and to take preventative, proactive and active steps to ensure a safe workplace free of harassment and bullying. These steps are not limited to the harassment and bullying between employees.

Spotting Customer Harassment and Bullying

Harassment and bullying by customers, suppliers and vendors does not look that dissimilar to harassment and bullying by others. Sometimes it can be difficult to spot as it seems to be the cost of doing business and keeping the customer happy or costs reasonable. At times the line between what is an appropriate request from a customer or a negotiation with a customer or supplier can be difficult to navigate. It is useful to take some time within your organization and clarify what potential harassment and bullying from a customer, supplier or vendor may look like.

Forms of harassment and bullying by customers, suppliers and vendors may include:

- Unreasonable demands for service, repeated calls for service, inappropriate requests for services or items
- Unwanted attention including following, calling, electronic communications, observing (watching or staring) and being present for no apparent reason while the employee is at work
- Inappropriate physical contact, aggression or physical intimidation with or without contact such as standing too close or making threatening or intimidating gestures
- Lewd, derogatory, suggestive, insulting or discriminatory remarks or comments, including verbally or in writing
- Threats including threats related to loss of business or work, withholding

payment, making complaints including officially (such as a complaint to management or industry regulator) or publicly (such as complaining about the worker or establishment publicly including on social media)

- Unwanted attention or requests for contact outside of work

In some organizations the line about what is acceptable may shift as a result of the services and customers in question. Employees who provide services to customers who have mental health concerns, dementia or behavioural disabilities will have considered what behaviour is appropriate and what is not.

It is important that organizations be vigilant with regards to spotting these behaviours and enabling and encouraging employees to identify and be comfortable reporting these behaviours to managers. It is equally important that managers be taught to respond to both the complaints and behaviours.

Taking Steps to Protect Employees from Customer Harassment and Bullying

1. **Create a Policy and Process to Address Customer, Supplier/Vendor Harassment and Bullying** – Include in this policy information about the types of behaviours that are unacceptable so your employees can understand their rights. This is particularly important for young and new employees. Include:
 1. First response options from employee and/or manager
 2. Employee reporting procedure
 3. Manager reporting procedure
 4. Customer, supplier, vendor management including a plan for identifying, tracking and progressive response to the situation (i.e. warning, removing the person, refusing to do business, banning the customer and so on)
2. **Educate and Hold Accountable Supervisors / Managers** – Train managers on their responsibility to observe and identify potential employee abuse in the form of harassment and bullying. Remind supervisors and managers that their employees' performance will suffer if they feel harassed and abused in the workplace and the costs for increased retention or health care or even legal protection if an employee files a complaint against the organization will cost more than losing a customer.
3. **Educate and Empower Employees** – Informing your employees that they do not have to accept harassment or bullying from customers, suppliers and vendors should be proactive. Train your employees to understand what is an appropriate interaction and what might be crossing the line. Some employees may have a greater tolerance for inappropriate customer behaviour. This can set an unsafe tone in the workplace whereby junior or new employees feel they have to accept inappropriate harassment and bullying. Encourage employee mentors to observe and mentor new employees on what behaviours are inappropriate.
4. **Train Employees and Managers to Respond Together** – Regular training on identifying and responding to workplace harassment and bullying by customers, suppliers and vendors should include opportunities for cross-training of all employees at the same time.

Managers/supervisors and employees need to hear the same information and be on the same page.

Include training on identifying people who may be experiencing a mental health concern and how this response may differ compared to other scenarios.

5. **Create and Post a Customer/Supplier/Vendor Code of Behaviour** – This need not be too odious but it should include information about treating employees respectfully, an appropriate complaints procedure if the customer/supplier/vendor has a problem or complaint, and your employee and

organization's right to adjust or terminate business with the customer/supplier or vendor.

6. ***Provide Employees with Support*** – Creating an atmosphere where bullying and harassment is not accepted is an important step in the process of demonstrating your efforts to provide your employees with a harassment and bullying free workplace.

When your employee has experienced harassment or bullying or witnessed it directed at another employee it is vital that you show your support by offering to provide some assistance. The assistance can include the opportunity to receive counselling, additional support in the workplace and an opportunity to discuss openly how the organization will respond in the future.

Your employees are ambassadors and extensions of your business. Striving to provide them with a safe and positive workplace will ultimately benefit your organization.