Manager’s Hot Seat Teaching Notes

Video #21 Workplace Aggression

Introduction

This case explores the gray area of workplace aggression. The scenario shows an employee reporting possible instances of workplace harassment to her employer. It will prompt great discussions with your students on acceptable and unacceptable workplace behaviors.

Learning Objectives

1. To assess the proper channels to follow when filing a workplace harassment claim.
2. To understand that performance and track record do not always equate with appropriate workplace behavior.
3. To identify traits of active listening.

Scenario Description

Overview

Glenn Lamar, Managing Director of PaperKlip Office Supplies, is conducting a grievance meeting with Gloria Westfield, a senior executive who has reported feeling physically threatened by a male subordinate. During the meeting various things occur: the male subordinate, John DiMaggio, knocks on the door and requests permission to participate having learned the meeting was about him.

Profile

* **Glenn Lamar**, Managing Director, has been with PaperKlip Office Supplies for 23 years and has been the Managing Director of North American Operations for seven years.
* **Gloria Westfield**, Senior Executive, was made a senior executive at the Company after being poached from a competitor four years ago. Her recruitment was the first senior-level appointment of a woman from outside the firm.
* **John DiMaggio**, Middle Manager, is a middle manager who has been with the Company for almost eight years. Although not particularly ambitious, John was not impressed by the appointment of an “unknown” woman above him.

Backstory

In the last month, there have been four instances of what Westfield describes as threatening behavior from DiMaggio:

* On multiple occasions, DiMaggio has entered Westfield’s office without knocking, walked right up to her desk, and hovered closely over her computer monitor before even uttering a word. In response, she has expressed her dislike of being interrupted in this way, and reminded him of common etiquette and company procedures, which require employees first to knock and then to request entry. DiMaggio’s response has been that office protocol doesn’t apply and there is no need to pull rank.
* Three weeks ago, Westfield was on her way to an important meeting, when DiMaggio blocked her progress down the corridor under the pretext of quizzing her about a sales report. She suggested if it were dire, DiMaggio should come to her office later, as she had an important meeting to attend at that moment. DiMaggio wouldn’t budge his intimidating frame, so, to avoid a confrontation, Westfield back-tracked towards the stairway rather use the elevators.
* In another instance, when Westfield tried to circumvent DiMaggio who was blocking her way down the hall, pressing her for details about bonus schedules, he grabbed her by the arm and glared, “You can’t brush me off. Answer the question and then you can go.” By luck, another colleague passed by and DiMaggio let go.
* Westfield has received a barrage of anonymous phone calls, where the caller calls incessantly but hangs up after two rings or, when Westfield has picked up, slammed the receiver down at the other end. Westfield feels convinced that the phone calls are coming from DiMaggio, but without proof she has done nothing to confront him and has held off, until this meeting, telling a superior.

Overall, PaperKlip Office Supplies is male-dominated, and Westfield feels sexism is prevalent. At times, it has been suggested that she looks far too feminine for the workplace (although her way of dressing is always businesslike), with the intimation that it detracts from her professionalism. In meetings, her voice is not so readily heard as those of her male counterparts and reference is often made to her superior “homemaking abilities” such as pouring water or organizing schedules. Most conspicuous, in its absence, has been the company’s willingness to recognize Westfield’s considerable merit to the firm by way of promotion or bonuses. In fact, she has continually been passed over for promotion in favor of her male colleagues.

Scene Setup

Lamar has a scheduled grievance meeting with Westfield, who reports being physically threatened by DiMaggio. During the meeting, DiMaggio requests permission to join the conversation.

Scene Location

Lamar’s office.

The Meeting—Summary

Westfield has asked Lamar for a grievance meeting to report her concerns with her subordinate, John DiMaggio. Westfield outlines for Lamar some of the behaviors she has experience with DiMaggio such as office intrusions and hallway confrontations. During the meeting, Lamar takes notes, compliments Westfield on her work for the company, and tries to understand the situation completely by asking follow-up questions. He presents possible outcomes to Westfield that DiMaggio may face. However, during the meeting DiMaggio, knocks on the door and barges in since he learned they were having a meeting about him. Westfield gets even more upset, while Lamar pleads for him to leave. Eventually, he leaves and Westfield and Lamar plan the next course of action.

Afterthoughts—Summary

Lamar believes the meeting went well. However, he recognizes that even he was uncomfortable when DiMaggio intruded. He respects DiMaggio as a worker, yet thinks his actions were out of line. Lamar is not clear on why DiMaggio has an issue with Westfield, but plans to document the situation. He may also bring up the scenario for discussion at the next meeting of managers.

Discussion Questions

*Leaning Objective #1 To assess the proper channels to follow when filing a workplace harassment claim.*

Since Westfield is DiMaggio’s boss, why doesn’t she just directly confront him about her feelings?

Workplace harassment situations are no time to be a vigilante, especially given the added layers of complexity in this case—superior vs. subordinate, male vs. female, old employee vs. new employee. Westfield made the right decision to contact HR first. They recommended that she ask for the grievance meeting with Lamar to officially document the situation. Without documentation, there would be no evidence for DiMaggio’s termination if the situation escalates and gets worse.

Policies and channels for reporting concerns of workplace harassment will vary by company; talk with HR for the proper channels.

*Leaning Objective #2 To understand that performance and track record do not always equate with appropriate workplace behavior.*

Westfield admits that DiMaggio has had excellent performance with his clients. Lamar also recognizes that DiMaggio has a great track record. Since he is such a good worker, should the possible workplace harassment issue be swept under the rug? Why or why not?

No, issues of workplace harassment should never be ignored. Westfield will continue to feel threatened in her position. Moreover, if DiMaggio is permitted to continue his behavior, he may start acting inappropriately to other (female) workers in the office.

*Leaning Objective #3 To identify traits of active listening.*

Listening is crucial to building trust. What traits of active listening did Lamar use in the meeting with Westfield?

Answers will vary somewhat by student discussion. Listening errors can easily result by being distracted by your own emotional response, especially when the topic is controversial, like workplace harassment.

Lamar used the following traits of active listening:

* Made acknowledgement responses such as nods, *uh-huhs*, frowns, etc.
* Paraphrased Westfield’s content by feeding back the meaning in his own words.
* Took handwritten notes.
* Identified the feelings he thought he heard.
* Asked for information or clarification on some of her points.
* Offered to help solve the problem.