

SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN THE WORKPLACE

So, what's the latest crisis in the news? Well, that depends..... what day is it today? Seriously, if you have been paying any attention to this column over the last year or two, and if you pay any attention to the news around you, you know there is just about always a new crisis being discussed on a daily basis.

Lately the topic has been male sexual harassment, or even worse, sexual assault, of women who work for, or with, men. Almost always, the man is in a position of power and the woman feels trapped. As we know, the topic first surfaced in the motion picture and entertainment industries. Then the allegations spread, like wildfire, to Congress, the business world, and just about everywhere else. And I guarantee you there are more allegations to come.

And you know what? This issue is not going away any time soon. Nor should it. With many crises, they make a large and loud splash, may cause a bit of controversy, are addressed (either successfully or not so) and then quickly fade away, usually because some new crisis comes along to capture the headlines. This subject is different. It is here to stay—at least until the problems are addressed. And that probably will take a while. This subject is here to deal with incidents of the past and present, so that they are not repeated in the future.

"How does this affect me?" you ask. Well, most crises are unexpected. They come when you least expect it. Sometimes crises are caused by third parties that you have no control over, but create an issue that needs to be addressed and managed. With this particular issue, it is a safe bet that sooner or later your organization will be asked about sexual harassment in your workplace or at your venue. You now have the luxury of preparing yourself for when the questions come.

The subject of sexual harassment in the workplace is a veritable tsunami that all can see coming. And you must prepare for it. Now. As I tell you in most columns, if you have a crisis communications plan, good for you! Now is the time to take it out, review it, update it if you must, and keep it handy for when that inevitable phone call comes. If you still have put off creating such a plan, I strongly suggest you spend some time immediately preparing such a plan. Start with deciding how you would address allegations of sexual harassment.

Now, I can still hear some of you saying, "But this would never affect me," or "We have a small office, and it is made up of all women," or "I know for a fact this has never been a problem for our organization." All of this may be true. But I dare say that many of the previously affected organizations would have said the same thing, prior to someone in their group being accused of these acts.

Just like any other crisis, the allegations may not directly affect you or your organization. What if someone on your Board is the target of these charges? Or maybe one of your largest donors? Or maybe one of the acts that you have booked for your event later this year is facing such allegations? When this information gets out, and it will, your organization will soon be hearing from the media, and in droves.

You will face questions like:

- "Are you going to replace that Board member?"
- "What are you going to do to ensure this doesn't happen again?"
- "Are you going to return the money they donated?"
- "Are you going to cancel this performer's appearance? Why or why not?"

You will need to be ready with definitive answers. If you are not decisive with your actions, or clear with your media responses, rightly or wrongly, you will appear complicit, if not supportive of the individuals against whom the allegations are made. Even if you go back and end up correcting or improving upon your initial responses, those first statements will be the ones that are remembered.

And don't be lulled to sleep by the fact that you are operating a small venue or in a small town. As we are seeing every day, the allegations of sexual harassment are everywhere—big cities, small towns, large industries, small mom-and-pop operations.

But this column is not all doom and gloom. As I say, you are fortunate in this instance because you can prepare.

Sit down today, or at least in the very near future, with your key communications team. If yours is a small operation, this might include your key leaders and any outside communications advisors you might retain. Ask the tough questions. How would you respond if asked about this issue as it relates to your company or event? How would you address allegations involving people inside your organization or those who are supporters? Will you cancel the appearance of someone who is accused of sexual harassment?

As with all crisis planning, let's hope you never are asked these questions, never touched by this issue, and never called upon to give your answers. But no matter where you are located, you must be aware that this issue is not going away, and sooner or later will be addressed in your locale.

Better to be prepared with the answers long before any questions are asked.

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