THE DARK SIDE OF HR: EMPLOYEE HARASSMENT

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Abstract: The success and growth of every organization depends on the coordinated efforts, staff commitment, employees’ overall understanding of organization’s work philosophy, personal commitments and their loyalty towards work, responsibilities given and overall working of the organization. Now a days the best competitive organization is one which believes in the overall benefit of its stake holder as a part of their CSR including external stakeholder such as customer, vendors and Government etc, and internal stakeholder i.e. Employee and their welfare and development. In this competitive era only those organizations grow and survive which not only serve better their external parties but also develop the policy and programs to make employees’ working environment tension and stress free i.e. employee friendly atmosphere.

Employees are one of the most important pillar and engine of growth for any organization but even after there are number of private organizations across the geographic territories which consider their staff very innocent and worthless & strongly believe in using employee harassment practices & getting desirable results through creation of extensive work pressure and employee exploitation strategies. This paper is a conceptual paper based on secondary data where related research literature was studied and explored in order to understand the basic philosophy behind employee harassment and its related issues. This study actually explored the basic philosophy of harassment, types of harassment, its impact on employees & working organization and various strategies to prevent the organization from this social evil.

Key words: harassment; sexual harassment; harassment training

I. Introduction

The society is changing very rapidly. With this rapid change in the society the life of people is also changing speedily. In any society, the quality of peoples’ life actually depends on their living style, their thought process, earnings, behavior and actions and their satisfaction with family, profession and career.

There are number of factors which cause these rapid and continuous changes in society including education, awareness, opportunities and cultural exchange and globalization etc. but among all industrial revolution played a vital role in creation of lots of impactful changes in society in the terms of employment generation, incomes, earnings, quality of life and in origin of industrial laws and personnel/ human resource policies.

From lot of studies and experiences it has been realized that for the healthy growth and development of the society, the development of man is equally essential which includes their psychological and financial upliftment in living society.

Among all important organizational survival resources- financial, material and human resources, manpower is the most crucial one and active resource which pay efforts for sound management and smooth functioning of the organization. Without considering their benefits and welfare, an organization cannot even imagine their existence and long term survival.

After globalization and privatization, Government of various nations in the form of legal & regulatory framework played a vital role in maintaining the sound industrial relations in societies and taken positive steps to regulate the lawful working of these industrial organizations with the help of various industrial and labor laws and legislations. But still research experience says there are number of organizations whose practices are unethical and are against employee benefits in-terms of their exploitation, day to day harassment and creation of stressful work environment. Among all, today harassment at work place is most common practice adopted by many private organizations and industrial employers in industrial societies in order to serve their various selfish motives and interests. Even in world community of researchers this becomes an interesting issue of social research also.
For understanding the overall picture behind this concept, its application and related practices one has to go through important theoretical and conceptual contribution made by researchers around the world.

II. Research Methodology
This conceptual paper is completely based on the review of literature in area of employee harassment at work place. The information used in this paper is collected through few on-line articles written on concept and implications of bullying and harassment at work place in different organizational settings and in different geographic locations including Britain, Scandinavia and Norway. The target respondents among all studied researches were including faculty, student, clerical, and service workers engaged in university, hotel workers, hospital nurses and many other employees working in both public and private organizations.

III. Review of Literature
“Reference [5] shows” that interpersonal workplace stressors involving sexual harassment and generalized workplace abuse are highly prevalent and significantly linked with mental health outcomes including symptomatic distress, the use and abuse of alcohol, and other drug use. From this study and analysis, researchers concluded that there is a significant role of interpersonally abusive workplace dynamics in constituting a significant public health problem that merits increased intervention and prevention strategies.
“Reference [6] explained” the experience of harassment of hotel workers by customers. The article also explored how hotel workers deal with cases of harassment, the complex ways in which they resist, and management reaction to harassment of their workers.
“Reference [7] explored” the impact of harassment on job burnout and turnover intentions among a large sample of hospital nurses in Britain. In this study there was a comparison of the effects of insider-initiated harassment from managers and colleagues with outsider-initiated harassment from patients and their relatives. This research article also examined the effect of ethnicity and the impact of effective anti-harassment policies on job burnout and quit intentions.
“Reference [8] explained” Harassment and bullying at work: A review of the Scandinavian approach, where the aim of this study was threefold which includes development of a framework for future research and theory development in this field, reviewing the Scandinavian research tradition according to this framework, and providing some suggestions for future research in the area. The studies of this phenomenon have mainly been restricted to the Northern European countries.
“Reference [9] studied” bullying and harassment at work and their relationships to work environment quality. The aim of this study was to explore relationships between organizational and social work conditions and the occurrence of bullying and harassment at work. Through this study, it was proved that low satisfaction with leadership, work control, social climate, and particularly the experience of role conflict, correlate most strongly with bullying. The results also show that different work conditions are related to bullying in different organizational settings.
The present study not only focus on a particular variable of harassment but also explored the basic conceptual philosophy, categories, consequences of harassment in work place and various strategies to handle this problem.

IV. Understanding Employee Harassment
Harassment covers a wide range of behaviors which are offensive and repetitive in nature. It is commonly understood as a kind of behavior which is intended to disturb or upset others. Legally, it is intentional behavior which is found threatening or disturbing.

According to various researchers and experts in the area “Workplace harassment is any unwelcome or superfluous conduct that shows enmity or ill feelings toward another person on the basis of characteristic confined by law, including an individual's race, color, gender, ethnic or national origin, age, religion, disability, marital status, sexual orientation, gender identity, or other personal characteristic protected by law. A conduct is unwelcome if the employee did not solicit or provoke it, and he regarded the conduct as objectionable or hateful.”

One always needs to remember that harassment is an action that is meant to or happens to cause discomfort for the victim. On the other hand, Bullying is when one individual or party socially degrades the victim either for the purpose of increasing their own self-comfort or for the gratification of others.
According to researchers there may be various forms of employee harassment. Few important examples of the same can be like:

Physical – It includes unsuitable touching of the body for example brushing, patting, hugging, pinching or shoulder rubs, kissing or inappropriate display of body parts, coerced acts of a sexual nature.
Verbal – including suggestive comments, humor, jokes or joking about sex, race, age, religion, disability or gender-specific traits, commentary about a person’s body, dress, excessive flattery or questioning of a personal nature, abusive language or insults.
Visual or Non-Verbal – includes Leering or staring in a sexual manner; whistling, hooting; vulgar sounds or gestures; offensive or hateful pictures, posters, calendars, cartoons or obscene e-mail; unnecessary attention in the form of love letters or gifts.

These all are very common and can happen with anybody in any organization and can cause lot of worry, tensions and can also hurt the image of a person publicly and professionally.

A. Types of Harassment

Harassment can be very different in its nature and its impact over victim and vary from place to place and person to person. The most common form of harassment includes-

1. Psychological/Emotional harassment

This is a kind of harassment where there is lot of humiliation and intimidation and use of abusive behavior which lead tensions and psychological pain to the victim and very difficult to detect unless victim reports or complaints. This normally lowers a person’s self-esteem, confidence and causes them torture. This may be in form of verbal comments, aggressive actions or constant gestures.

2. Racial/Ethnic harassment

This form of harassment includes harassing of a person because of their race or ethnicity. This may include words and actions used specifically to make the target person feel dishonored due to their race or ethnicity.

3. Sexual harassment

Sexual harassment is a form of bias and includes any unwanted comments, manner, or behavior regarding sex, gender, or sexual orientation. Whether this wrong doing is made by a manager, co-worker, or even a non-employee like a client, or vendor, such behaviors creates an unreceptive work environment and disturb an employee’s success. [1]

4. Religious harassment

This is also very common form of harassment including verbal, psychological or physical harassment against target person because they believe and choose the practices of a specific religion. It can also include enforced conversions.

V. Hostile Work Environment And Employee Harassment

While working on a job there are lot of difficulties and challenges to be faced by the staff in the form of comments and actions came from the boss, a top management official, co-worker and non-employee such as a service provider, vendor or visitor. This occurs when there is an unwelcome comment or conduct based on sex, race or other characteristics related to employee’s work performance and creates hostile and disgusting work environment.

The actions that may cause sexual hostile environment harassment may include-

- Staring in a sexually indicative way,
- Writing, Sending, forwarding sexually suggestive letters, remarks, emails, or pictures,
- Telling sexual jokes, hanging sexual posters and making sexual gestures,
- Making insulting comments about looks, clothing and body parts,
- Touching in a way that may make an employee feel uncomfortable for example patting and pinching.

The actions that may result in non-sexual hostile environment harassment may include-

- Use of racially insulting words, phrases, and comments,
- Offensive or bullying references to an employee’s mental or physical harm,
- Expression of very negative stereotypes regarding an employee’s native land or heritage,
- Negative clarification about an employee’s religious beliefs,
- Comments about an individual’s body color or other racial/ethnic characteristics,
- Demonstrations of gestures, pictures or drawings which would insult a particular racial or ethnic group.

VI. Accountability For Employee Harassment

Whenever there is a case of employee harassment in the organizations then the responsibility of such type of incidents primarily goes to employee himself. Many a times employee become inactive and does not want to oppose this harassment in fear of image or job loss. It is the duty of every employee to report the cases of harassment to the appropriate authority on right time for getting effective and immediate solution to this workplace evil. On the other side, the second most responsible person or authority for workplace harassment is the boss or manager or the supervisor. In many cases it is found that boss himself spoil the work environment and create lot of trouble and tensions for its working staff in order to realize them his/her position and power. They harass their juniors for selfish purpose and self pleasure. In several cases it has been realized that they do sexual harassment of their staff for fulfillment of their sexual desires. This applies to harassment by the boss against junior staff of the opposite sex as well as harassment by him against subordinate of the same sex.
An employer is also responsible for harassment between co-workers, if they knew about the conduct and failed to take immediate and appropriate corrective action. The employer is also responsible in case of harassment by non-employees such as customers, vendor or any other visitor against its employee's during the workday. The Human resource manager/director or similar authority in consultation with the top management and union leaders of the working organization also has its responsibility to prevent the workplace from the cases of sexual or non-sexual harassment. HR officials having their responsibilities in terms of making strong personnel policy and laws, clearly defined workplace norms & regulations and establish a disciplinary and clearly defined grievance handling procedure to handle strictly the cases of employee harassment at work place.

**VII. Consequences Of Employee Harassment**

From the research literature, it is found that the harassment at workplace can cause lots of problem and bad consequences for victim as well as the organization. Few of them may be-

- Harassment is very disruptive of production. It can seriously affect victim/employee work motivation and morale.
- It may increase absenteeism and turnover in the organization which will impact overall functioning of system.
- Because of harassment practices, an owner’s or company’s market and community image/reputation may also suffer.
- It can create lot of workplace conflicts and stress in form of strikes or walk outs which finally adversely impact sound industrial relations.
- A victim’s back pay; lawyer fees and costs may be considerable.
- Compensatory and punitive damages under national law may radically increase dollar or rupee or other currency damages.

**VIII. Strategies For Preventing Harassment/Bullying In The Workplace**

- Development and Implementation of a strong policy clearly prohibiting harassment and define strictly disciplinary consequences.
- Develop an “Employee-friendly” complaint procedure which will encourage employees to come forward and to report their problems on time and regularly inform employees about the how to take full advantage of this complaint process in order to make workplace harassment free.
- Provide training to instruct and educate employees on the issue of harassment which is popularly known as harassment training and periodically remind them their moral and ethical responsibility for maintaining a harassment free workplace.
- Avoid making credibility judgments or reaching conclusions before one has gathered the facts.
- Develop an open line of communication (two way continuous communications between management and staff) and make sure the complaining employee is informed of management efforts to correct any harassing behavior.
- It is really very important to ensure that every complaint is taken seriously and proper investigation is done in a timely manner. It is the ethical responsibility of top leader to take appropriate corrective action as soon as possible.
- Develop the policies that regulate continuous social contact between supervisors and subordinates which is ultimate in favor of both concerned parties and develop their mutual and long term understanding for personal, group and organizational benefit.

**IX. Discussion**
A primary concern of every organization and its management is to keep and maintain the healthy, safe and comfortable workplace which is free from all possible interpersonal conflicts, workplace tensions and undesirable employee exploitation practices. For the successful functioning and achievement of goals, it is desirable to initiate and communicate all possible steps to safeguard employee interest & welfare. Harassment at work place spoil the overall work environment and reduces the degree of understanding and good relations among co-workers and between employees and employers. According to “Mike Broemmel” [4], an author and expert in the area, certain powerful steps like harassment training as a part of orientation training can help to describe employees the various consequences of engaging in harassing activity, as well as the possible steps to prevent this kind of impermissible conduct and behavior at work place.

Harassment whether it is in sexual or non-sexual form can actually damage the overall social and market reputation of the organization. For sustaining survival and continuous growth, the employer and its management need to remember that “Happy worker are productive workers.”

So it is the time to take certain preventive and constructive steps to make the organizational environment bullying and harassment free.

References