



Leanne Faraday-Brash

# Should I speak up? Should I get involved?

**A** number of recent high-profile workplace sexual harassment cases have thrown this issue back into the spotlight. One case in particular involves former David Jones CEO Mark McInnes who allegedly sexually harassed the retail giant's former publicist Kristy Fraser-Kirk.

However, according to statistics gathered by the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) in 2008, only 16 per cent of those who had been sexually harassed at work in the last five years made a formal complaint.

## **"I know it when I see it" ... but do you?**

Organisational psychologist Leanne Faraday-Brash says "some people don't speak up because they may not identify the behaviour they're receiving as sexual harassment". "Some people will get unwelcome overtures, compliments, invitations to drinks ... so they fail to identify it as unlawful behaviour. They may not know it's legitimate to speak up."

The AHRC has also identified this as an issue, saying 22 per cent of people it interviewed said they had not experienced sexual harassment, only for them to change their minds after being given the legal definition.

Faraday-Brash says it may start off with "innocuous" behaviour such as attention, cheekiness or over-familiarity, flattery or a compliment that may escalate. In some cases, the person receiving the attention may be a high-powered, confident individual who may see it as "just one more challenge in the workplace they have to face and

they believe they can handle it". Sometimes, the harasser can be "quite infatuated" with the person and not understand that what they are doing is deemed sexual harassment under state or federal law.

Some victims are humiliated or intimidated and don't tell the harasser it is unwelcome attention. Instead, they go into an "avoidance pattern". "They feel, if they try and keep a wide berth, they don't have to complain. They don't have to deal with the perpetrator and they don't have to face the possibility of victimisation," Faraday-Brash says.

## **Should I speak up?**

Then there's a reluctance to speak up. Faraday-Brash says this can be because the targeted person is new to the workplace and wants to "fit in", is afraid of being marginalised, or seen as "a trouble-maker, or 'trigger-happy'". The perpetrator may be someone in a position of power or someone who is popular and the target can be understandably "scared of pay-back", she says.

Faraday-Brash points out that not all sexual harassment is perpetrated by men against women. She says that is the most common presentation because anthropologically, the male is the "hunter". Further, demographically, in most Australian workplaces, men still occupy the majority of senior positions and sexual harassment is largely about the imbalance of power.

But men too can be sexually harassed – by other men or by women. "Sexual harassment is blind to

sexuality [and] is not gender-specific," she says.

Faraday-Brash says the incidence of women harassing men is "difficult to pinpoint" because a large proportion of men just won't report it – "it's socially undesirable" or it "casts aspersions on their sexuality". She has seen many men ridiculed for perceiving attention by any woman as undesirable. "Men have exactly the same right to choose what kind of relationship they do or don't want with any associate at work."

"[Especially] in a blue-collar environment, there's a real lack of social desirability in reporting it for fear someone will think something is wrong with them."

There's also sometimes the "shame and self-doubt" of the person making a complaint. They may be worried that perhaps they sent a mixed message or will be perceived as "prudish or uptight", she adds. "They may be too intimidated to say anything to another staff member and the perpetrator is counting on that."

## **Should I get involved?**

In 2008, the AHRC found 12 per cent of Australians had witnessed sexual harassment in the workplace in the last five years. Though, interestingly, more witnesses reported incidents (35 per cent) than those who experienced it (16 per cent).

Nevertheless, on such a sensitive subject, many people in the workplace, if they know about it, may not want to get involved. "They may not understand the impact on the victim

and/or be frightened of victimisation themselves," Faraday-Brash says. She says in many cases, others may not step forward as witnesses until a formal investigation is underway and then they feel obliged to share what they know.

"Some may voice a private concern ... [because they are] scared of the implications," she says. The law is designed to protect someone who supports a complainant but sometimes in the "real world" they are let down, Faraday-Brash emphasises.

They will more often than not offer "tacit support" or provide a "confidential" account. "More often I see people having a quiet word with management ... rather than being formally involved," Faraday-Brash says.

Again, she points out that others in the workplace might not recognise the behaviour as sexual harassment. "They may only see a thin slice of the behaviour." Most harassers save "the really insidious behaviour" for when they are alone with the target, she says.

#### **Making it your business**

Organisations need to make it their business to stamp out sexual harassment in their workplaces. Sexual harassment occurs in all sizes of business, Faraday-Brash adds.

In big companies, it could take the

form of an ingrained culture – where it's dressed up as a "vibrant, young environment" and it's the norm to "push the envelope with each other", particularly when there are lots of work functions outside work hours with alcohol involved, she says. However, big companies are also more likely to have equal employment opportunity (EEO) training and policies; and "organisational pressures" on management to enforce those policies.

### **Some victims are humiliated or intimidated ... they go into an "avoidance pattern".**


In small workplaces, there's less "fear of exposure" for the harasser, she says. And it's more likely that in such workplaces, people are working closely together and there's "no protection" for the person being harassed, particularly if they're young, inexperienced in relation to their rights, work alone with the harasser for long periods of time and really need the job.

Faraday-Brash says management needs to "start with modelling appropriate behaviour themselves, so that others know what is acceptable and what isn't". Management needs to promote its EEO policies and conduct

regular training on it so that it isn't just in place, but it is obvious, in people's faces.

Once a complaint has been made, it needs to be dealt with "discreetly and professionally" for people to "trust" the process, Faraday-Brash says. "The organisation must be prepared to deal with the harasser no matter how senior, how charismatic and popular, and no matter how much the person contributes to the financial success of the company."

Further, there should be a process in place to reintegrate complainants back into the workplace and ensure they are not victimised all over again. Faraday-Brash says most of the clients she works with provide complainants with counselling, or if feasible, a mediator to get the relationship "back on track". Often the relationship between the two parties is no longer tenable and the company may move one or other of the parties out of the area so the complainant doesn't have to constantly work with the harasser.

"Most [companies] will recognise that they need to do everything reasonable to make sure the person is feeling safe at work. It's important to remember not to move the complainant against their will because if allegations have been proven, they are the victim and should not be the party to wear the punishment." 

## **Reduce workplace hazards**

All CNC machinery produces an oil mist. Centrifugal oil mist collectors from Filtermist are a proven solution to meet OH&S requirements by returning coolant back to your machine and returning clean air to the workshop.

Hazards of oil mist can include:

- Respiratory and skin problems
- Slippery walkways
- Fire hazards
- Faults on electrical control panels

**For more information, call 1800 010 113.**



Market Expansion  
Services by  
[www.DKSH.com](http://www.DKSH.com)



DKSH Australia Pty. Ltd.  
14-17 Dansu Court, Hallam VIC 3803, Australia  
Freecall 1800 010 113, Fax (03) 554 6677, [www.dksh.com.au](http://www.dksh.com.au)