

# Navigating the minefield of harassment at work

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When Betty Buck took over her family's beer-wholesaling business in 1985, she quickly found herself putting up with men who gave her grief because she was a woman.

At a training meeting, a man told her that she belonged "at home and in the kitchen." Her strategy was to ignore the disparaging remarks.

But when Buck attended her first state convention as the company's leader, she was surrounded by men who used bad language, disrespected her and failed to treat her as their peer. So Buck told them she wouldn't stand for their behavior.

"What it boiled down to was does it affect just me, or will this have a long-term effect on the women who will follow me in the business?" said Buck, 49, president of Buck Distributing Co., which was founded by her father 60 years ago in Upper Marlboro, Md. "If you don't stand up for yourself in a man's world, no one else will. It was always the good old boys. They needed to learn to move over and make room for the girls."

## The usual victims: women

As far as women have come in the workplace, they still face gender stereotypes, sexist attitudes and inappropriate behavior on the job. Many women find themselves using various strategies for combating boorish behavior: deciding which taunts are better left ignored, which warrant a quick response and which need to be taken to a higher level.

Such gray areas present a dilemma for female employees: How much should they put up with before taking action? Or should they speak up at the first incident of an offensive comment or behavior?

Many women acknowledge it's something they're forced to deal with daily. In Maryland, the issue has re-ignited public debate since state Comptroller William Donald Schaefer was criticized for ogling a 24-year-old executive assistant to Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. during a public hearing last month. And on Long Island, five women in the Nassau County Police Department recently filed a complaint charging they've been subjected to lewd remarks and pornography in an atmosphere that gave preferential treatment to men.

Women's rights advocates say female employees — or for

that matter, male workers — don't have to tolerate any behavior they find offensive, regardless of whether it meets the legal definition of sexual harassment.

But dynamics such as office politics, peer pressure and fear of being labeled a troublemaker play a role in the choices women make, experts say.

Schaefer's comments to a young female staffer that she "walk again" for him during a public meeting caused an uproar. The woman has not spoken publicly about the incident, but Schaefer said she told him she was embarrassed by his comments. Schaefer publicly apologized a few days later.

## What the law says

Under federal law, sexual harassment is a type of discrimination defined by the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission as "unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physi-

cal conduct of a sexual nature."

In order to meet the legal threshold, workplace experts and lawyers say, employees typically must prove that the behavior or conduct was pervasive and produced a hostile or intimidating work environment.

The victim as well as the harasser can be a man or a woman, and sexual harassment does not have to involve the opposite sex. Experts say harassment cases typically involve a male offender and a female victim. Of the 12,679 sexual harassment charges filed with the EEOC in the 2005 fiscal year, less than 15 percent were filed by men.

But even with federal and state sexual harassment laws and company policies in place, women still face tough decisions.

"It's all good to say, 'Here's the [sexual harassment] policy, the law, we have zero tolerance,'" said Lee Bernstein, a

California-based human resources management consultant who trains managers and employees on sexual harassment. "Yet, what's the reality?"

"I'm not saying that a senior executive or CEO or president will get you fired," she added. "The person [being harassed] sees the road in front of them and thinks, 'I know in my heart it was harassment, but all things considered, it may not be worth it. I have my job, I like my job, I make good money.'"

Nonetheless, Bernstein and others advise women to speak up directly to the individual who engaged in inappropriate verbal or physical conduct. In most situations, the behavior or comments stop there.

In Buck's situation, the beer wholesaler made her expectations clear to her male peers. Buck gained respect and credibility because "I stood my ground."

When unwelcome conduct doesn't stop and becomes per-