# MSPB Sees Less Tolerance for Sexual Harassment in Federal Workforce

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**Following is a section from a recent MSPB publication analyzing findings regarding sexual harassment in the federal workplace from the most recent Merit Principles Survey.**

As discussed in MSPB’s research brief, Update on Sexual Harassment in the Federal Workplace, approximately 14 percent of respondents to the 2016 MPS reported experiencing sexual harassment in the previous 2 years, including 21 percent of women and 9 percent of men. When Federal employees experience sexual harassment, they have numerous options regarding how to respond. They may even choose to use more than one of the possible options if the initial response fails to have the desired result, or even worse, if it has a negative effect.

The three basic strategies for responding to harassment can be summarized as:

(1) actively responding to stop the harassment,

(2) avoiding the harasser, and/or

(3) tolerating the harassment. There are pros and cons associated with each strategy. Therefore, an employee’s choice likely reflects many factors, such as: the perceived seriousness of the harassment; knowledge of the various options for responding; confidence level that the organization will be supportive; and the calculation as to whether the action(s) will lead to the desired outcome of ending the harassment versus being subjected to increased harassment or retaliation.

Data from the 2016 MPS show that about 60 percent of Federal employees who experienced harassment took a direct approach and asked the harasser to stop, which can serve as a critical first step to put the harasser on notice that the behaviors are not welcome. Slightly over one-third of employees said that they reported the harassment to officials and another third threatened to report the harassment. Only about 10 percent of those who reported being harassed actually filed a formal complaint (e.g., equal employment opportunity complaint or a grievance).

Given that so few employees file formal complaints regarding sexual harassment, agencies should not rely upon complaint activity as a measure of the level of harassment in the organization, especially given the many diverse reasons an employee may choose not to file. For example, an employee who experienced harassment may not have needed to escalate the level of response if the situation was corrected informally through one of the other strategies or was viewed as not serious enough to warrant further action at that time. However, in some cases, the employee may have feared that filing a formal complaint would have caused additional problems without resulting in any positive change. Perhaps such fears drove respondents to use more avoidant strategies in dealing with perceived harassment. Approximately 60 percent of respondents said that they avoided the harasser. Given that an almost equal number said they asked the harasser to stop, it is possible that avoiding the harasser may have been an initial strategy that led to direct confrontation when the behavior became too much, or vice versa. In addition, 12 percent took avoidance to the extreme of changing jobs or locations. Although this may have helped the person escape the harassment, it likely passed the problem along to the next person to be targeted by the harasser. Further, the person taking the evasive action may have harmed his or her own productivity and career progression by making decisions fueled by avoiding a negative presence rather than devoting their full energies to accomplishing their own goals, which also undermines organizational effectiveness.

However, perhaps the most damaging response to sexual harassment (by either the target or observers) is to simply tolerate it. Whether the employee chooses to ignore the behavior, make a joke about it with the hopes that it will stop, or simply goes along with it because he or she is afraid to speak up, this can embolden the harasser who might interpret the silence as condoning the behavior. Furthermore, these behaviors were rated by employees as least effective in improving their situation after harassment.

Fortunately, a comparison of results between 1994 and 2016 show that both men and women are increasingly likely to take a more active response. When combined with a supportive organizational response, this type of action is most likely to eradicate sexual harassment. Use of the avoidance strategy has also grown, which signals that Federal agencies can and should do more to educate employees regarding anti-harassment policies and to encourage employees to use the procedures that are in place to respond to and report harassment. Similarly, although too many people still ignore harassment, make light of it, or even acquiesce to it, the percentage of employees tolerating harassment has significantly decreased. The decrease is likely due to employees’ raised awareness of their rights and responsibilities for maintaining a workplace free of harassment, as well as their agency’s efforts to hold harassers accountable.

While the onus should be on the harasser not to subject others to harassment and on the organization to hold harassers accountable, this shift in employee behavior from accepting sexual harassment in the workplace to taking a more active stand against it signals a change in many Federal agency cultures. Ensuring that employees are aware of— and feel comfortable using—all of their options in response to sexual harassment will more effectively support the effort to reduce sexual harassment in Federal workplaces now and in the future.

Thank You

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