

The Spectrum of Sexual Misconduct at Work (SSMW) – Where We Draw The Lines

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Daily we read about yet another person who has been accused of sexual misconduct. And yet, except in the more obvious cases, people are unsure of where offensive or inappropriate behavior ends and sexual misconduct begins. We're operating in a maze. It's time for some clarity and direction. Aristotle distinguished between mistakes and wickedness. So can we. Here's a start.

Spectrum of Sexual Misconduct at Work (SSMW) – Kathleen Kelley Reardon, Ph.D.

Decisions about which category a behavior falls into depend on the situation, tone of delivery and nonverbal behaviors. This is not a set of cut-and-dried categories. It's a first-pass blueprint for organizations – a way to start talking about what is and isn't sexual misconduct. Additional examples can be added, some moved. The point is to get this conversation underway.

Non-offensive:

Common off-the-cuff compliments on such things as hair style and dress. "You look nice today;" "I like your haircut,"

"That's a nice outfit;" "That's a good color on you."

Awkward/Mildly Offensive:

Comments on gender differences such as: "You would say that as a woman," "I suppose it's a woman's prerogative to change her mind;" "We can't speak frankly around you women anymore."

Offensive (Not necessarily or overtly intentional)

Holding a woman's arm while talking

Uninvited hugs

Patronizing/dismissive/exclusionary behavior toward women

Sharing jokes about female blondes, brunettes, red-heads, etc.

Implying or stating women are distracted by family

Seriously Offensive (Intentional lowering of women's value)

Denigrating comments about women in general

Jokes about a woman's limited intellect or skills due to her gender

Words like "ice queen" or "female mafia" when referring to women

Comments about physical attributes used to insult or demean a woman

Evident Sexual Misconduct

Looking a woman up and down in a sexually suggestive manner

Grabbing, rude patting and unwelcome holding

Unwelcome, unexpected kissing

Ignoring a woman's expressed disinterest in a personal/intimate relationship and continuing to hassle her

Making or telling crude jokes that demean women

Describing women with such terms as "slut" or "frigid"

Trying to demean a woman by implying/claiming she uses her gender to advance career goals

Egregious Sexual Misconduct

Exposing genitals

Physical sexual behavior while a woman is present

Pressing against a woman suggestively

Threatening/implying career damage to a woman who refuses to engage in sex or sexual behavior

Forcing or coercing a woman to have sex