

Stalking in the Workplace — Steps to Protect Your Employees



Overview

Love is a beautiful thing, but not when unrequited love invades the workplace. What do you do when a former employee's romantic interest in another employee turns into stalking? Are you obligated to intervene?

The Situation

Greg is a former employee of A & B Apparel. He resigned about a month ago to accept a new job.

Even though he no longer works there, Greg is a regular "visitor" at the store. Since he was a well-liked employee while he worked at A & B Apparel and his visits are not distracting to the employees, Jan, the Store Manager, did not have a problem with Greg's visits.

Last Friday, Greg made another visit to the store. He briefly chatted with his former coworkers, then Jan saw him pull Marcia aside for a "private" conversation. Jan noticed that Marcia seemed slightly uncomfortable talking with Greg, so she kept an eye on them.

Jan saw Greg place his hand familiarly on Marcia's shoulder and heard Marcia shout "Leave me alone!" Jan quickly walked over and asked what is going on. Marcia burst into tears and Jan asked Greg to leave the store.

Once Greg left, Jan immediately saw the relief in Marcia's eyes. Jan asked Marcia what happened and she was shocked by Marcia's story.

Marcia told Jan that Greg had been harassing her for several months. When Marcia started working at A & B Apparel two months ago, Greg had asked her out. When she turned him down, Greg started sending her inappropriate text messages and leaving voicemail messages that left the impression he had been following her around outside of work. After Greg left the store, his calls and text messages to Marcia increased in frequency.

Jan asked Marcia why she never told anyone. Marcia said she was embarrassed and she did not think anyone would believe her since Greg is so well-liked. Marcia then showed Jan the text messages, which corroborated her story.

After talking to Marcia, Jan knew what she needed to do. She informed her management team that Greg was no longer welcome to visit the workplace. She also told Marcia that she should consider reporting Greg's behavior to the authorities.

Unfortunately, Marcia's story is not uncommon. Sometimes a workplace crush can transform into a stalker situation – even after the employment relationship has ended. Employers have an obligation to stop third-party harassment when the harassing behavior occurs in the workplace.

Protect Your Employees

Take the following steps to help protect your employees from a third party harasser:

- Develop a strong harassment/discrimination policy that extends to employees, customers and vendors.
- Communicate procedures for reporting aggressive or agitated customers, reporting complaints and suspicious behavior.
- Educate management and employees about bullying and stalking behavior and the proper protocol when these issues arise.
- Establish policies and procedures that provide support for victims and employees should an incident occur.

Remember, in some situations it may be appropriate to involve the local authorities for inappropriate or stalking behavior that occurs outside the scope of employment. It is advisable to seek direction if an employer is unsure about whether a situation qualifies as a law enforcement matter.