

Members Quarterly

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Feature

Harassment: The Biological Wiring Clampdown

The urgent need for more discussion

Lauren Evans

The biological wiring concept was recently introduced into the short discussion on harassment in the workplace and was amply covered by the media, which played up the “outrage” at the statement.

In our ultra polite, conflict-avoidance, Canadian culture way, we quickly vilified the utterer of the heretical idea, stomped around a bit, effectively quashing any useful discussion that might have helped advance anti-harassment in the workplace.

The Canadian way has many wonderful things about it. However, my work related to employment equity, anti-harassment and mental health in the workplace is genuinely challenged by this very Canadian approach to discussion around issues that are “uncomfortable”. While we Canadians are typically so worried about offending or creating conflict, we default to what we perceive to be the polite thing and say nothing. Saying nothing may feel safe, but it can also have the effect of thwarting progress. There is nothing like the rousing exchange of ideas following conflict or even outrage to get people thinking and opening up their minds to different ideas.

During my training sessions to managers and employees on how to approach and offer support to a colleague/friend they suspect might have undiagnosed depression, anxiety or some other type of mental health problem, the question always comes up. Someone asks ‘Excuse me, but I have to ask - before we talk about how to do it, are you sure we *should* do it? What if they are offended? What if we invade their privacy?’ Are you sure?

Yes, I am sure. It is not only okay, it is best to talk and ask questions and explore issues, if you are well-intended, well-meaning and sincere. This can help open minds and might even open the right doors for those needing direction.

I am glad I had not given that advice to the utterer of the biological wiring statement. Personally, I believe it should have been okay for him to say what he said. However, if I were to ask him about it today, I think if he had to do it again he would shove all those words back in his mouth.

What a missed opportunity! Here was a senior person in a position of power who was thinking about harassment and trying to figure it out. This was a golden opportunity for the rest of us to pick at that thread of his idea and to engage in discussion about harassment. We could possibly use the idea to our advantage and leverage it to put pressure on the system. If it is biological wiring, then maybe we need to look at *more* than putting in place policies and grievance processes. Maybe we need to figure out how to be more watchful. Let’s get tougher! Instead, because the statement was not nuanced, was too bold, too direct and too un-Canadian, we shut down the discussion altogether.

Another unfortunate effect of how this saga played out is that it validated the reluctance of managers and employees to talk about issues of culture, race, gender, physical disability, etc. in

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any quasi public forum. When it comes to employment equity and diversity, unless you are absolutely sure about which words to use and how to phrase things in a perfectly politically correct way, the feeling is that perhaps it is best to say nothing at all. In my work with executives around issues of employment equity, I must go to great lengths to create safe forums where they can ask what are actually mundane and routine questions. Otherwise, if they call someone who is non-white using a word that is inappropriate (are they coloured, visible minorities, black or of African descent?), it will become a big deal. So, here is the conundrum – our Canadian politeness gets in the way. Even if we want to learn more in our day-to-day, we don't ask the questions. We become muzzled.

So consider this. I do believe that when most people read about men harassing women, they imagine big, ugly brutes from tormented backgrounds who should never have been in the workplace in the first place. From my work over the last 30 years in all types of organizations, I can share that many of the men who are accused of harassing women and even those men who have been found guilty of harassing women are generally nice, intelligent, caring men. Many have healthy relationships with other women in their lives. So what gives? I don't know if there is an element of biological wiring, group mentality, societal influence or power shift when men harass women. But shouldn't we talk about it to help us figure out how to deal with it? What about those cases where women harass men? Don't we owe it to ourselves to acknowledge and discuss this phenomenon as well?

We can all agree that harassment is a complicated dynamic issue and there are all kinds of things to talk about, so let's talk. Instead of saying "biological wiring—interesting thought, we should be looking at what the research says," we collectively said "How dare you? What's wrong with you?" I guess we Canadians are not quite so polite after all.

Lauren Evans is President of LEI Consulting and specializes in mental health education and Violence Risk Assessment. She can be reached directly at laurenfrom3a@gmail.com