

Handout 1: Malcolm and Zandra

Malcolm

Malcolm was a very committed member of his church and a number of local community organisations. He was well respected as someone with a heart of gold and a lot of time and energy to devote to good causes. By contrast, his boss, Philip, had never become involved in church or community activities, preferring to reserve his spare time for the golf course. He therefore found the considerable respect and good will shown to Malcolm quite irritating and was clearly quite jealous of the fact that a member of his staff seemed to be more highly respected than he was. Unfortunately, however, Philip did not keep his jealousy to himself and used his negative feelings towards Malcolm to justify being quite aggressive towards him and unduly demanding in terms of the quantity and quality of work he expected of him. He worked very hard to make Malcolm's life a misery, abusing his power over him as a result of the jealousy and irritation he felt.

Zandra

Zandra was not the only black woman in the organisation but she was very much in the minority. She worked very hard and was very eager to please. However, to her great distress she found that, whatever she did, it was not good enough. There was always someone who would criticise what she did. She felt trapped, knowing that her white colleagues, particularly her male colleagues, were not subjected to anywhere near as much critical scrutiny as she was. It was as if she was expected to produce low-quality work and so people were ready to find fault even when none was present. She found this pressure quite intense, and although she realised just how unfair it was she felt powerless to do anything about it, as she was aware of how this situation reflected the broader picture of society, with its unhelpful and insidious images and stereotypes of black people, and particularly of women.

Handout 2: Tim

Tim was regularly subjected to intimidation at the hands of his supervisor, Dennis. It got to the stage where Tim felt he had to do something about it. After a long period of deliberation he plucked up the courage to challenge Dennis and to tell him that if he didn't change his bullying tactics, Tim would have no option but to seek his trade union's support in taking him to court. Dennis's response was short and brutal – to the effect that, if Tim were to go anywhere near a union official, he would wish he had never been born. Unfortunately, this was enough to dissuade Tim from taking the matter any further. He did not feel he would be sufficiently protected from Dennis if he took any further action. He therefore continued to put up with the onslaught from Dennis.

Handout 3: Forms of sexual harassment

The problem of sexual harassment can arise in a number of forms or guises, including the following:

Inappropriate sexual humour

This involves using sexualised humour to embarrass or humiliate, leaving the victim feeling their privacy has been invaded and their dignity undermined. This is not the same as being prudish about 'dirty' jokes, but does mean that sensitivity is called for.

Inappropriate language or touching

Sexualised language or touches in what could be regarded as intimate places can also be very intrusive and oppressive. This is a very sensitive matter and one that has to be looked at carefully. For example, in some circumstances it may be perfectly appropriate for a male to put his arm around a female colleague, but in other circumstances, this may be very inappropriate indeed. If there is any doubt at all about whether such contact would be welcomed, it should not be risked. Even if there is no intention to create difficulties, if it does create such difficulties for the person concerned, then clearly it is inappropriate.

Persistent attempts to commence a relationship

Many deep, successful and long-lasting relationships begin in the workplace and so it is clearly not the case that we would want to ban any sort of romantic attachment developing in a work context. It is therefore quite legitimate, within certain limits, for a member of staff to seek to start a relationship with a colleague. However, the difficulty comes when the person rejects advances but the suitor persists, despite receiving clear messages that the other party is not interested. Such insensitivity can easily amount to sexual harassment.

Implicit or explicit threats or inducements

Someone in a position of power can seek to gain sexual favours through that power (the classic example, of course, being a male manager who expects more than secretarial duties from his female secretary). This strategy can be based on threats (openly or indirectly), such as demotion, or inducements (again either openly or indirectly), such as promotion or better conditions of service.