**Harassment: A True Story**

**A Manager’s Experience**

***Disclaimer:*** *This is a true story; however, names have been changed to ensure anonymity and protect the privacy of employees.*

**Isabelle Baechler (host):** Hi, My name is Isabelle Baechler, I’m an Advisor with the Office of Values and Ethics. Thank you for tuning into our podcast, a series created in collaboration with the Harassment Centre of Expertise

These real life stories will shine a light on harassment, and the impacts on the lives of people.

Stay tuned for advice on what to do when facing a harassment situation like this.

And now, it’s time to meet our guest, who we will call Louis. All the names in this story have been changed. This is Louis’ story.

**Louis (victim):** I was, and still am, a manager in a team. I will share a situation that involved harassment by a couple of employees.

One of the employees we had at that time, let’s call her Valerie, she’d been with our office for a couple of years and she was seeking new opportunities elsewhere given that she wanted to move up to a higher level. Valerie had become unhappy at work since she was informed by our Director that she had to apply and compete in order to reach a higher level position, it wasn’t just going to be given to her.

Since then, Valerie would start her day, every morning, by complaining to every employee about how the Director didn’t want to give her a promotion. Also, there was a case where she would prepare documents and presentations and then give them directly to the Director General. I understood that Valerie was trying to show her skills to the DG in the hopes of obtaining favour and perhaps a promotion, but the operational issue here was that both the Director nor I had seen these documents, and the DG didn’t ask for them either. So when I approached Valerie on this issue, she became even more unhappy and disengaged.

Valerie continued to spread negativity to the rest of the team every day. And another employee, we’ll call her Karla, joined in by going from employee to employee and claiming that one employee said this bad thing about another; in essence she started various conflicts between other employees while making herself look like she was everyone’s friend.

In the following 18 months, Valerie and Karla worked together to sabotage my reputation. Now I didn’t know this was happening at the time. All I knew was that I was regularly called by my Director to his office, and he would accuse me of many things that I didn’t do. What I found extremely difficult was that my Director didn’t tell me where these complaints were coming from and he kept the allegations very vague. When we would meet, he would give me the impression that he had already formed conclusions without hearing my side. I could see it in his face, I knew that he was conflicted because when I responded to him, when I had a chance to respond, my explanations were honest and made sense.

One of the challenges I had to deal with is that my Director disliked confrontation. Whenever he received a complaint, he couldn’t disagree with them even if the substance of the complaint was not true and did not make sense at all.

At that time, I constantly defended and explained myself to my Director when he saw fit to call me to his office. I worked harder than ever before to show him that I was still a top performing manager. And to deal with the accusations, I always presented facts and evidence, that was just how I worked.

During the period when I was being accused of many things, it was incredibly upsetting because I thought and felt that this was so unfair and unjust.

More than a year after these events, Karla and Valerie had left the Department by then and it was only at that time that the employees who were still in the team came forward and told me that Valerie had decided to target me and she was able to convince Karla to join her in her efforts. Valerie and Karla decided that because I was the only manager on the team, they would complain to the Director to “get rid” of me in order to create an opening in the org chart so that then they could move forward in their career.

The staff also told me that during that time I had withdrawn and stopped interacting with everyone socially. I rarely spoke to anyone at all and if I did, it was purely related to the work in the office. I was afraid that my words would become twisted and turned into a complaint against me.

To this day, I feel profoundly betrayed by this Director. I lay a large part of the blame on him as he should have stepped up. He should have done his job and he should have stopped these bad behaviours and he didn’t.

I learned a lot about how my Director worked. This was an important lesson because every manager and Director should have a strong awareness and understanding of how they can best work together. I realize today that all my efforts with him at that time were useless. My explanations to him had no effect because he had already formed conclusions that I was guilty before he had the facts and my side of the story.

I learned firsthand that toxic behaviour in the workplace can have deep and lasting effects on people and therefore, as a manager, I have a responsibility to protect my staff from toxicity and incompetence. As a manager, my priority must be the human beings that report to me and the operation. My personal needs come after, not before. If my manager, or my Director, or my Executive does not have these values, I don’t want to work for them. And if I have supervisors or team leaders that don’t have these values, I don’t want them to have staff reporting to them.

To this day, I still have a very difficult time trying to figure out what else I could have done differently. I wish I had known the facts. I wish the other staff had come to me earlier to tell me what they were struggling with and what they were observing. If I had known more, I may have been more effective in dealing with the situation.

That said, I have since tried to make something positive out of this horrible experience. I defend my staff from bullying, harassment and incompetence. In fact, a few months ago during an all-staff meeting, there was a group of individuals who were bullying my staff and I stood up in front of everyone and told these bullies to stop their behaviour. To my amazement, they did stop, and it prompted the whole division to reflect on those behaviours. I learned that I couldn’t depend on my Director, or rely on him, or anyone to do the right thing. I learned that I could only rely on myself to survive in toxic workplaces where bullying and harassment are the norm.

In a few other instances, when I observed rude remarks or behaviours starting to develop, I have called out these behaviours and made it very clear that while I am here, there will be no rude, inappropriate behaviours, bullying and harassment in my area. Some staff have come forward to tell me that they appreciate this and that this is one of the major reasons they want to continue to work in our office.

Another thing I do differently now is ensuring that our staffing process is more stringent and robust. I make sure that we are very, very clear in identifying not just the skills and experience qualifications we require, but also the behavioural expectations for admission into the team. One toxic employee can destroy the team and the operation. I find that we just cannot afford to employ these types of people anymore.

**Isabelle Baechler (host):** Situations like these can be really hard in a work environment. It can have a negative impact on your wellbeing professionally and personally. We will now welcome Maire-Élaine, an advisor from the Harassment Centre of Expertise that will give you advice on what to do when facing harassment situations like these.

**Marie-Élaine (HCE):** I’d like to start by saying that managers have the same rights as all employees to work in a place that’s free from harassment.

Valerie and Karla’s harassing behaviours were completely unacceptable They could have had devastating impacts not only on Louis’ career, but also his wellbeing. Had he been aware of exactly what was happening at the time, he might have been in a better position to work through the issues with his employees. He could have used informal conflict resolution solutions. He may also have been able to explore disciplinary measures if the behaviours continued. Managers can always reach out to Labour Relations who can answer any questions in that regard.

In normal circumstances, we would encourage a manager having difficulty with employees to reach out to their supervisor for support. However, in this case, Louis’s Director not only failed to provide support, he also withheld information and failed to hear all sides.

My advice to someone who might find themselves in a similar situation to Louis’, by that I mean where they are being harassed by their employees and not getting support from their immediate supervisor, would be to reach out to the next level of management in your chain of command. If you’re not comfortable doing that, you can always seek guidance from one of the many resources available in our department like our office, the Office of Values and Ethics or the Office of Informal Conflict Management.

If you are a manager and you are listening, remember that you have the obligation to act when an employee comes to you to say they're being harassed – even if that employee is a manager themselves.

Here’s what you should do, first of all:

* Take the time to listen carefully.
* You should also remain impartial, and don’t prejudge the situation and make sure you hear both sides of a story before you draw your conclusions.
* Finally, rest assured that help is available to support you in managing the situation and don’t hesitate to reach out.

I would also strongly encourage any employee who finds themselves caught in the middle of a situation like this, to speak up. Valerie and Karla’s co-workers knew what was happening but didn’t say anything at the time. While it can be difficult for some people to address a bully directly, in most cases, doing so results in the behaviour stopping right away. And if a direct approach is too hard for you, talk to a trusted supervisor for help.

If you are looking for training options regarding harassment, please contact the Office of Values and Ethics. They offer presentations that can be held in-person or virtually for your team. If you are experiencing or witnessing harassment, whether you are an employee or a manager, please contact the Harassment Centre of Expertise. I encourage you to consult the iService page for more information or you can reach out to one of our advisors for a consultation. We offer neutral support and services to everyone. Our team of advisors will guide you towards the appropriate solutions and will support you along the way.

**Isabelle Baechler (host):** I think that we can all agree that this was unacceptable. If you experience a situation like this, you should get help, speak up, and don’t suffer in silence.