**Harassment: A True Story**

**Manager harassing employees**

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

**Karine Spuehler (host):** Hello. My name is Karine Spuehler, from ESDC’s Office of Values and Ethics. Welcome to our podcast series in collaboration with the Harassment Centre of Expertise (HCE). These are true stories that shine a light on harassment and its impact on the lives of people.

At the end of this story, an advisor from the Harassment Centre of Expertise will give you advice and guidance on what to do and where to go when facing, managing or witnessing a harassment situation.

It’s time to meet our first guest who we’ll identify as Alex. Other people’s names have also been changed. This is Alex’s true story.

**Alex (victim):** My story takes place over a two-year period in the last five years. So at the time, I was working as an acting Manager and I reported to a Director who created a very unhealthy, fearful and even toxic work environment. I’m going to call this Director Charlotte.

My experience working for Charlotte really can only be described as bittersweet. Charlotte was extremely intelligent, very persuasive, carried a lot of influence and, really just made things happen no matter what she did. Because of these proven and established qualities, you know you would be considered really lucky to work for someone like Charlotte.

Things started off pretty well working as a new Manager working for Charlotte, I recall learning an incredible amount of things from her. She had an enormous amount of experience within the Department and seemed like she was connected to almost everyone across the Department. She also carried an enormous amount of clout. So really, it was someone you would look at and admire and look up to and think I want to be like this person, I want to learn from this person as much as I can.

Soon after I started, I really started to see another side of Charlotte; and it wasn’t really one that I liked. I recall telling Charlotte about how my wife had had surgery and how she was having a hard time recovering from it and I remember Charlotte looking at me and giving me this, kind of this look and just saying, telling me how my wife was essentially a wuss and how this generation needed to toughen up and realy be more like her generation which was “stronger and more adaptable to whatever the environment is”.

**Karine Spuehler (host):** According to Alex, the negative comments were not only personal in nature, they were also related to the workplace. The impact of Charlotte’s words, actions and behaviours had a truly negative influence on the management team.

**Alex (victim):** I recall even a story where she had bumped into one of my employees in the lunchroom and asking them “hey do you guys have any gossip?”…and when my employees had heard that they had recalled that there might have been kind of an amalgamation of two different units into one she kind of laughed it off and just said ”That’ll never happen”. At my next bilat, she told me that I needed to quote unquote “watch” these employees that she had spoken to, since, in her opinion, they were spreading rumours that were untrue. When I went back and spoke to those same employees to ask them what had actually happened, they told me “no, no, it was really Charlotte who really pushed us to share any gossip even though we didn’t really have any, we just said, you know we told her what she wanted to hear.” When I reported back to Charlotte and told her what my employees had said, you know that they said that it was actually her who, they felt, strongly encouraged them to talk about rumours, Charlotte told me they were all liars and I needed to watch these employees closely because they were now on her blacklist.

Because I had to work with Charlotte as one of her managers, several times, she would kind of invite me to be on conference calls with committees or working groups related to the work that we did together. Every time someone would talk on the call, she would tell me about how incompetent or how much of an imbecile they were, just about how they lacked qualities, how they didn’t know what they were talking about, and how she could do their job a lot better than them. Every time someone else would chime in to kind of give their opinion, I remember Charlotte would just call them one offensive word after another. She would curse, quite frequently to varying degrees. Because she had such a large and strong vocabulary I mean she could come with up some really, really creative curses or creative names for people. Whenever Charlotte though would chime in to talk about something related to the call, she would always acknowledge how intelligent the other people were, she would even thank them, “oh thanks for making that comment whoever you were”, but really she would put them back on mute and then she would say “oh, what a stupid thing to say why did this person say this?”

She would also often get into shouting matches with people, berating them for being “ridiculous” or incompetent. These conversations sometimes would lead to doors being slammed or desks being pounded or even things being thrown around the office. Sometimes we would even run into the people that Charlotte would be talking about, you know, who she would treat as being incompetent or ridiculous and she would be so friendly with them. And I remember thinking to myself “what? I don’t understand what’s happening here.” But really this behaviour just led me to lose trust in Charlotte, made me wonder how she talked about me when I wasn’t there. I really started to feel like at that point I really couldn’t trust her or anything that she said to anyone.

**Karine Spuehler (host):** Having trust in supervisors, managers, directors and even ADM’s is important and actually fundamental to building a healthy workplace. When that trust is broken it has repercussions and actually very severe consequences.

**Alex (victim):** One incident that really stands out in my mind was a conference call that I had organized between me, Charlotte and two of my Team Leaders to deal with a Labour Relations issue that had come up. So, one of my Team Leaders was not able to connect to the call. She was having, you know, a bunch of technical issues. And when the Team Leader finally joined the call, she was chuckling to herself about how difficult it was to connect to the call. Well, when Charlotte heard the Team Leader laughing, she yelled at her, she screamed at her, she berated her, she told her that this was not a funny situation and that if she wanted to laugh about it, she should go home right now and really think about whether or not this job was right for her because nothing was funny about the situation. Charlotte also said that this situation demonstrated this Team leader’s incompetence and their ability to do their job properly. She finished by saying that if the Team Leader didn’t change the approach, then she would have to find another position because Charlotte would demote her. When the Team Leader began to cry on the phone and apologize, Charlotte just muted the line and she turned to me and, I’ll never forget what she said, she said “I really had to make her cry, she really needed that”. I remember being completely stunned just thinking about, why would you ever want to make someone cry? How could you possibly think that that would help them? The relationship between this Team Leader and Charlotte really was never the same again.

A few weeks after this incident, Charlotte asked me to send her a dashboard, kind of a report of the work that my team had been doing for the last quarter. A few minutes after I sent the report I remember hearing Charlotte screaming, and saying you know “Get in here Alex!” So I walked up, I went into the room, into her office, and she said “What is this document that you sent me?” When I told her it was what she has asked me for, she replied “No, this is not what I asked you for, this is crap!” I told her I even had an email with instructions for what she told me to do, instructions that she told me to follow for the report. I went to get the paper, I printed the email, I went to get it and I showed it to her, she took one look at it and said, she crumpled it up and she said “No, this is not what I asked you for, I want you to do it again, and I want you to do it right this time!” And she paused, and she made sure I was watching her throw the piece of paper out in the garbage, then she said please leave my office and close the door behind you. And I remember thinking to myself, you know, “If I’m expected, if she tells me to do something and I do what she asks me for and it’s still not what she wants, how exactly am I supposed to make this person happy?

Really this story demonstrates one of the biggest issues I had working for Charlotte. She was so unpredictable that it made it hard to anticipate how she would react to any situation. Really these situations, these stories just made me feel completely demoralized and I began to question my own work and my worth and the quality of the work I was putting out. Up until I had worked for Charlotte I thought I was good at my job, but if my Director didn’t think so, maybe I wasn’t that great after all… you know I really started to doubt everything that I did. Really the impact that the situation had on the rest of the employees that reported to Charlotte was people just began to be afraid to take chances, to talk to management, to make mistakes. People were constantly walking on eggshells because really they weren’t sure which Charlotte was going to show up: was it going to be the pleasant one, was it going to be the vindictive, and petty one? Was it going to be the knowledgeable, intelligent and helpful one? You just didn’t know.

There really wasn’t much of anything done about any of these incidents. Charlotte continued to work this way for many, many years. As a Manager, really the only thing I could do was to help the people who were most affected by Charlotte’s behaviour. I would constantly apologize for her behaviour and I would really just try to take the brunt of it, to try and shield the employees from as much of it as possible. Sometimes she would ask for employees to report directly to her or to give her an update on something, and I would say, “you know what, let me take care of this” just so they wouldn’t have to deal with any potential fallout or her reaction. Often times, the only thing I could do was suggest the Employee Assistance Program because I just felt so powerless to be able to do anything to be able to affect the situation. At the time when most of these incidents happened though, I was still an acting Manager and quite frankly I didn’t want to put my job at risk, I didn’t know if I said the wrong thing, or did the wrong thing if Charlotte would pull my acting away and that was not something I wanted to do. You know, I saw people being labelled as being liars, I saw people being accused of not saying truth, I saw people being treated as incompetent or having their jobs threatened, no one really had the guts or even the audacity to do anything about it.

Really what I learned most from this experience though is that one person really can have a huge impact on a very large team. At the time you know I worked on a very large team and I think everyone was very kind of afraid about what to say to Charlotte or how to behave around her really. It even got to the point where people would come up with code names for when she was coming around by using the weather. Like for instance if she was coming around, the weather would be cloudy or rainy. And if she had just left, the weather would be sunny and pleasant. So it got to the point where people would try to warn people about what kind of mood she was in or if she was coming or if she was leaving. One thing I took away from this and still carry with me to this day is I always try to be aware of the impact of my behaviour on others, because I saw, you know Charlotte just behave in a way where she had no regard for the impact of her behaviour on others. That’s something that I really try to, to take with me every single day.

I really do wish though I had done something about it or at the very least more than I did. Looking back, I know I should have probably talked to Charlotte to let her know about the impact of her behaviour on others. Realistically though, I really don’t know if I would have done anything differently because the situation was so intolerable I can’t even picture myself standing up to her, even today where we both moved on to different jobs completely.

**Karine Spuehler (host):** Now that we’ve heard Alex’s story, let’s hear from the advisor of the Harassment Centre of Expertise, Guillaume Wildgust.

**HCE Advisor:** We know it can be difficult to detect harassment in situations like the one that Alex has just described, where inappropriate behaviour isn’t directed at one person in particular. In this case, a Director abused her authority and over time has created a highly toxic work environment. Uncontrolled anger, throwing things, feeding rumors, threatening the employment of others and talking about employees behind their backs in such an unacceptable and demeaning way are all behaviors that need to be tackled and stopped as soon as possible.

We almost always recommend speaking directly with the person who has offended you to share your discomfort and to ask them to stop the behaviour. But given that Alex had heard the Director threaten the employment of other colleagues, it is easy to understand why this approach might not have seemed possible at the time.

For those of you listening, it’s important to know that there are other options. You can talk to a trusted supervisor to share your concerns, discuss this with your union, or you can ask us at the Harassment Centre of Expertise. Our advisors can provide you with guidance even if your goal is not to make a formal complaint. Whether you are a witness or a victim, a manager or an employee, contact us, that’s why we’re here.

We also want to be clear that reprisals are not tolerated in any way. If you feel your job is threatened, it is important to talk about it. The title and position of a person does not allow them to abuse their authority or to act inappropriately without consequences. All employees have the right to a healthy, respectful and safe work environment - our advisors are here to help.