

Intent Vs Impact

In preceding lessons, we studied the sequence of events that led to the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act being passed in 2013 and this Act's components.

In This lesson we will explore the concept of "intent versus impact" by looking at an incident involving Karan and Anita, who are at their annual office party.

Karan notices Anita sitting alone and wants to make her feel included in the team.

**Karan (with a pleasant, genuine smile): "Hi, Anita. You're sitting all alone here. would you like to join me on the dance floor?"*

Anita (politely): "No, thank you, Karan."

Karan: (Assuming Anita is shy, Karan grabs her wrist and tries to pull her onto the dance floor. Smiling, broadly) "Come on, you are new to the team. You will get to know us better."

Anita – shocked and embarrassed - feels highly uncomfortable with Karan's touch and tries to break free: "No, I'm fine. Thanks. And I don't take kindly to people touching me like this."

Karan realises that Anita is upset and apologises immediately.

Karan (genuinely sorry for his actions): "I'm so sorry. I was just trying to break the ice. I did not have any wrong intentions behind my words or actions."

Intent Vs Impact

Often, situations that have no malicious intent behind them can inadvertently end up as inappropriate and unprofessional behaviours.

Sometimes, even if a person *does not* intend to hurt or offend someone, their behaviour may be misinterpreted due to various reasons such as....

Course: Prevention of Sexual Harassment at the Workplace

Lesson 6: Impact vs Intent

- Differing perceptions about what constitutes acceptable behaviour
- Social differences
- Cultural differences

It is important to remember that what constitutes workplace sexual harassment are actions that are not only explicitly “sexual” in nature but also those that are viewed as being “unwelcome”. And, what constitutes a “sexual” or “unwelcome” action is an entirely subjective matter. Therefore, one would do well to understand that in sexual harassment cases, the *intent* of the individual whose action has been deemed to constitute sexual harassment doesn’t matter. What matters is only the *impact* that their actions have had on the aggrieved individual; on the complainant, in other words.

In Karan and Anita’s case, Karan’s didn’t *intend* to make Anita uncomfortable. But his physical touch *impacted* Anita negatively and would thus be considered “unwelcome”, Karan’s benign intentions notwithstanding

Of-course, Karan apologised immediately. But considering what we now know constitutes sexual harassment and the concept of intent vs impact, Karan should have left Anita alone the minute she had refused to join him on the dance floor.

How can one ensure that their behaviour does not amount to harassment?

When in doubt, ask yourself these three questions...

1. Is my behaviour disrespectful or offensive to someone?
2. Is there a possibility that my behaviour might be misinterpreted, possibly due to cultural or social differences?
3. Will I tolerate such behaviour if my parent, spouse, child or sibling were treated similarly?

Answering these questions can help you gain clarity about and avoid behaviours that could be considered sexual harassment.

Thus far, you have learned about the meaning of workplace sexual harassment and the intent vs the impact of an action.

In light of what we’ve learned so far, we will explore various actions that would constitute sexual harassment in the workplace.

Course: Prevention of Sexual Harassment at the Workplace

Lesson 6: Impact vs Intent

Before proceeding to the next lesson, though, please take the accompanying quiz.

Happy Quizzing!