

**Western Forestry Contractors' Association  
2017 Work Place Harassment Workshop  
WFCA Annual Conference  
1 February 2017**

**Proceedings notes from panelists and audience**

Three panelists initiated a discussion with the audience based on their own experiences of work place harassment as workers, supervisors and owners. The panelists included Chris Akehurst owner of Akehurst and Galvanni Reforestation Ltd., Jordan Tesluk consultant and former tree planter, and Allyssa Burrows, worker. John Betts WFCA Executive Director moderated the proceedings. Kamilla Milligan, Acting Manager, Equity and Human Rights University of Victoria also commented as an observer. The many audience participants should be noted too for sharing their frank and insightful stories and comments.

**Executive Summary**

Sexism is more prevalent in the tree planting industry than is generally recognized. In spite of the near-equal gender balance at the worker level, the management hierarchy is male-dominated. With that bias go some blind spots on the part of male workers, as well as direct and indirect condoning of some inappropriate behavior by some leaders. Nevertheless, work place harassment is not limited to men intimidating women. It can work both ways, within the sexes, and between age groups. Supervisors can actually be the problem, sometimes selected for traits that might make them bullies. As well we tend to select people like ourselves ensuring, we repeat certain patterns. This tendency works possibly at the expense of those with different dispositions while denying the benefits of diversity. At the same time employers must check references more carefully to ensure they hire the right kinds of workers. Companies must have actual programs to deal effectively with evidence and allegations of work place harassment. This involves more than empty statements about zero tolerance. It includes having very clear ideas about what constitutes a respectful work place and what constitutes harassment, along with defined processes for dealing with complaints, properly orienting workers, and having appropriately trained supervisors and managers. Evidence and allegations of work place harassment need to be dealt with in a timely, proportionate way, otherwise they will lead to even worse problems along with the costly remedies needed to address them. For the best things to happen it is critical to have open communication on work place harassment both ways between workers and managers.

**Main stand-outs and observations:**

One general definition of work place harassment describes it as any behavior undertaken by an individual that makes another worker feel uncomfortable. WorkSafeBC states:  
*"A worker is bullied and harassed when someone takes an action that he or she knew or reasonably ought to have known would cause that worker to be humiliated or intimidated."* Neither of these are intended to include reasonable actions taken by an employer to manage and direct workers.

Some of the evidence and allegations reported by workers to the BC SAFE Forestry Program went beyond harassment describing assaults, including sexual assault, that fall under the Criminal Code of Canada.

There may be a tendency to believe that societal norms around harassment and other behaviours are suspended on reforestation crews, due to the isolation of some camps, cultural assumptions about being a fringe community, lack of wise leadership and good examples, and the general inexperience of the workers and some supervisors.

Although the overall demographics of the industry show we are approaching a gender balance at the worker level, the sector remains male-dominated. With that goes a bias that may not fully appreciate the female perspective and the prevalence of sexism in the work place, camp, or motel, and the circumstances that are attached to work. As a result, women may often be exposed to continuing sexist innuendo, jokes, and gestures, that go uncorrected, and, in effect, condoned by fellow workers and leaders. Even if this sexism falls just short of actual harassment—it may not—it certainly sets the conditions for it to happen.

Workplace harassment is not limited to just men intimidating, or preying on women. It can be the other way around. It can also occur between age groups and between members of the same sex. Nor is just between workers. In a number of cases reported to the BC SAFE Forestry Program, supervisors were the problem, often bullying and harassing both women and men under their charge. In some cases workers have harassed supervisors, undermining crew morale and their leader's authority.

We tend to hire or promote individuals resembling ourselves. This practice will lead to confirming any biases, and possibly blinding us to shortcomings or bad habits that result in prejudice. It also denies firms the benefits of having a diversity of views, gender and approaches contributing to their company's energetic culture.

In some cases individuals are unwisely selected for promotion because they possess the same traits that might make them bullies when put in a position of authority. Supervisors and forepersons should be chosen for the traits that make them proper motivators, instructors and leaders. Likewise employers should properly check the references of individuals who apply to work so they can avoid hiring workers who might be inappropriate for their crews.

It is imperative to deal with work place harassment problems right away. Left without intervention they will worsen, possibly leading to even more egregious forms of harassment, even assault. These situations involve more suffering for victims and worse consequences for supervisors and owners as the violations attract the OH&S Regulation, the Criminal Code of Canada and The Canadian Human Rights Act.

Dealing with work place harassment problems requires having actual resources, tools, and procedures available to workers. These need to be communicated clearly to them, emphasizing that work place harassment is not part of their job description. Statements about zero tolerance are hollow if not supported by actual methods.

At the same time front line supervisors need to be trained to recognize harassment and how to receive complaints appropriately. It may be the case that some operations would benefit from having a designated manager skilled in the proper handling and resolution of harassment complaints.

Accountability is critical. A company must walk the talk and leaders cannot be seen to contradict their firm's commitment to preventing work place harassment through their actions or inactions. It is difficult enough, in many cases, for victims to come forward. It will only be worse if they are getting mixed signals from management. As has been stated by victims, they are not typically out for retribution. They just want their right to be left alone to get on with their work, which may be hard enough as it is.

In the long run it will be communication that succeeds in reducing work place harassment. This communication should work both ways. Employers must clearly lay out to employees their conditions of employment, and how they plan to prevent work place harassment. By commitment and example they should make it clear that employees are safe to report harassment. Likewise workers should do just that if they are victims. As well they should contribute constructively to how their employers can improve their practices. And everyone should watch their own behavior. It is evident from the February workshop that work place harassment is something the tree planting industry needs to be talking about.

There are no plug-and-play work place harassment policy and practice systems for firms that we know of or can recommend at this point. The value in having these systems is often the thoughtfulness that is required of owners and managers in describing what a respectful workplace should look like, and designing the necessary systems to support it. There are, of course, consultants who may be able to assist. WorkSafeBC does a good job of laying out the essential requirements at <https://www.worksafebc.com/en/health-safety/hazards-exposures/bullying-harassment>