

## Working to Prevent a Hostile Work Environment

You might think that a hostile work environment could never occur in a church or religious setting — but it can. A hostile work environment could take many forms, and be caused by anyone.

The **U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission** <https://www.eeoc.gov/laws/types/harassment.cfm> says that “harassment becomes unlawful where 1) enduring the offensive conduct becomes a condition of continued employment, or 2) the conduct is severe or pervasive enough to create a work environment that a reasonable person would consider intimidating, hostile, or abusive.” This does not include “petty slights, annoyances, and isolated incidents (unless extremely serious).”

Here are some examples of behaviors that could be found to create a hostile work environment:

- John is Sally’s supervisor. The two are friends and often flirt with each other. This does not bother John or Sally — but it does bother Samantha, who shares an office with Sally. She feels so uncomfortable when John enters their office that she leaves until the other two are done speaking. Often, she has to wait for nearly an hour for him to leave so she can resume her work, and this happens more than once a day. Samantha now often stays late or takes work home.
- Lisa, Tom, and Michelle are co-workers. Lisa tells jokes throughout the day. Some are harmless, but some include racial slurs or sexual content. Tom and Michelle both have asked her to stop, but she ignores their requests and says they are “just jokes.”

### Prevention is Most Effective

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission says, “Prevention is the best tool to eliminate harassment in the workplace.” The Church Pension Group’s *SafeguardingOnline* program offers two modules that can help to prevent sexual harassment:

- ***Safeguarding God’s People: Preventing Sexual Harassment for Workers***
- ***Safeguarding God’s People: Preventing Sexual Harassment for Managers and Supervisors***

Both modules provide information on types of sexual harassment, men’s and women’s perspectives on sexual harassment, and how to prevent and respond to it should it occur.

### Bullying in the Workplace

Sexual harassment is not the only contributor to a hostile work environment. Bullying can make an individual feel uncomfortable and intimidated — and adults can be bullies, just as children can.

Here’s an example of how a manager can bully an employee:

Angie is Jim’s supervisor. She thinks that Jim makes too many mistakes and draws attention to them in front of everyone else in the office. She starts to say that anyone who makes a mistake is “being like Jim.” The embarrassment flusters Jim, causing him to make even more mistakes. Soon the whole office ridicules Jim throughout his workday. Jim begins to dread going to work.

## Harassment Should Not Be Tolerated

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission suggests that supervisors “should clearly communicate to employees that unwelcome harassing conduct will not be tolerated.” Supervisors should set up protocols making it comfortable for employees to make complaints, and to investigate allegations and act when something inappropriate has been found to have occurred.

The Commission also encourages employees to, “inform the harasser directly that the conduct is unwelcome” and “report harassment to management at an early stage to prevent its escalation.”

If harassment has occurred in your organization, let your insurance company know about it in a timely manner because a hostile work environment could potentially lead to a liability law suit. **Employment Practices Liability Insurance** <https://www.cpg.org/administrators/insurance/property-and-casualty/policies/directors-officers-insurance/?ref=tabbedBanner> covers this type of risk.

Everyone deserves to work in an environment where they feel secure and comfortable. Preventing harassment before it begins is a great way to make that possible.