Perspectives and Strategies in Confronting Workplace Harassment

**Purpose**: to allow students to develop a strategy for dealing with rumored workplace harassment as well as (optional) address their preconceived notions about gender

**Time**: 45 - 60 minutes

**Resources/Set-up**: Copies of the situation (in italics, below)

*You are the Director of Human Resources for a medium-sized financial services institution. You overhear an employee, Pat, tell a coworker, Chris, that a third employee, Jamie, informed Pat about being the recipient of harassing behavior from Chris.*

**Activity Instructions**: Students should be asked the following questions, in order, with time for discussion of each question before preceding to the next question.

1. As the Director of Human Resources, do you have an obligation to investigate what you overheard?
2. If you chose to investigate what you overheard, who would you approach and why? (What information would you seek to collect and what questions would you ask?)\*

\*-The second question can involve a role play in front of the class which the class analyzes in addition to an open discussion of the question. Students can also be placed into small groups to discuss how they would propose to deal with the situation.

Optional

1. What assumptions, if any, have you made concerning the gender of the participants? Would your approach in dealing with the situation be different with different combinations of gender of the participants? Does YOUR gender play a part in how you approach the situation, particularly deciding which of the individuals you would approach?

**Discussion/debrief**: This exercise allows students to face two very common real-world scenarios: 1) dealing with allegations of harassment in the workplace and 2) dealing with rumors about employees which may or may not be true. The exercise intentionally makes the “harassment” unspecified. Students may immediately assume that the harassment is sexual in nature, although the scenario does not state that. This can lead to a discussion of the different types of harassment which may take place in a typical workplace and the obligation different individuals may face in reporting and dealing with various forms of harassment. Also, because the parties in the overheard conversation are not the alleged recipient of harassment, a discussion can take place regarding how to deal with rumors, innuendo and gossip about others in the workplace.

The three parties in the case all have gender-ambiguous first names. Instructors who wish to explore gender issues can assign (and change) genders of Chris, Pat and Jamie and ask students whether their responses to the situation might be different given different gender combinations of participants (in tandem with the gender of the student). Many students immediately assume that the possible harasser Chris) is male and that the possible recipient (Jamie) is female. This can facilitate a discussion about student’s preconceived notions about gender as well as the fact that harassment in the workplace can occur between any two employees, regardless of the gender of either. Gender assignments of parties can also explore same-sex harassment, at the instructor’s discretion.

Typically female students will report feeling more comfortable addressing another female, regardless of whether that individual is the alleged harasser, recipient of the harassment or third party. Male students similarly prefer to address the issue with another male, regardless of that individual’s role in the scenario. This can facilitate a reflection on the part of students as to whether and why they feel more comfortable approaching a same-gender individual, if such is the case, and advantages and disadvantages of this predisposition.