

The Ombuds Office

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Dos and Don'ts for Responding When Another Person Tells You That Your Behavior is Perceived to be Harassing or Offensive

by Tom Sebok

DO . . .

1. Listen as non-defensively as you can.
2. Assuming it's true, assure the person that you did not intend for him/her to feel harassed, uncomfortable, or offended.
3. Tell the person you are sorry she/he feels the way she/he does as a result of your behavior.
4. Assure the person that you want her/him to feel comfortable in your presence and ask what you could do differently in the future so she/he would not feel that way.
5. Assuming the person's request would not prevent you from doing your job, agree to do what she/he asks to avoid the problem in the future.
6. Acknowledge that it may have been difficult for the person to approach you, given how she/he felt, and thank her/him for telling you directly about her/his concerns.
7. Ask her/him to please let you know in the future if she/he ever feels uncomfortable again.
8. Let her/him know she/he may speak with your supervisor if she/he would like to (and who your supervisor is – unless you know she/he knows) about her/his concerns.

DON'T . . .

1. Say she/he "is being too sensitive,"
2. Say she/he "has no sense of humor,"
3. Say he/she "is a prude,"
4. Say she/he "is flattering herself/himself" (if she/he believes you made unwelcome advances toward her/him),
5. Say he/she "is wrong,"
6. Say she/he "has mental/emotional problems,"
7. Threaten her/him,
8. Retaliate against her/him for complaining, or
9. Engage any further in the specific behaviors about which she/he is complaining!