

When People see Unacceptable Behavior

When people see unacceptable behavior in the office or classroom or lab, why do some intervene, on the spot, and some do not? Why will some people report the behavior and others will not? **(Most do not report.)**

* **The reasons vary** by personal history, perceptions of the supervisor, perceptions of the institution, and the issue at hand, together with other factors like the availability of support and the nature of the evidence—"I would report only if I had absolutely conclusive proof." Many people fear "bad consequences" and also believe that nothing good can come of action. Many do not believe that managers really want reports of unacceptable behavior.

* **The worst fear of most people is to lose relationships**—with the offender, with colleagues, fellow students and co-workers, family and friends. Some fear retaliation from the supervisor; they believe that the institution "has nothing to gain" from learning of unacceptable behavior. People hate the situation of "her word against mine," so many will not report without conclusive proof. (Many also believe that a department head will take no action without *both* proof and publicity.) Others fear loss of privacy, and hate the idea of "rocking the boat." Many people—including supervisors—truly hate investigations. Many fear unfairness (to all parties) and incompetent complaint handling.

* All who have need of a complaint system—or are affected by it—are "customers." **However, the "first" customer for a complaint system is the complainant**, whether that person is an offended person or bystander.

* **Research indicates that managers and supervisors can make all the difference** in persuading people that the organization really wants to know about unacceptable behavior. Supervisors can make sure that policies are well known, that the complainant has a choice of options, that "bad consequences" will be mitigated if possible, that "good consequences" are possible, that people will be appropriately supported—and appropriately held accountable—and that action will be timely, fair to all parties, and as private as possible.

