

How to Confront Inappropriate Comments at Work

by Timothea Xi; Updated September 26, 2017



Whether it's the off-color remark intended as a joke or outright statements intended to slander or browbeat, inappropriate comments at the workplace have the potential to create a hostile work environment, hurt employee morale and jeopardize productivity. If you are the recipient of such a comment, you can take a stand without being the bad guy.

Address the Person Directly

Upon hearing an inappropriate comment at work, some people might be so stunned that they simply walk away rather than address the offender. Career services consultancy The Credo Company advises responding politely instead. When doing this, be specific about what the issue is and avoid using absolutes such as "always." One example of a reply would be, "What you said to me just now was vulgar and inappropriate. I'm uncomfortable with your remarks and I ask you to stop."

Slow Down the Conversation

It can be intimidating to face a person who has just made an inappropriate comment. If the person is especially aggressive, a bully or someone who just enjoys making others feel uncomfortable, your response might simply add fuel to the person's malice rather than extinguishing it. In such cases, take a step back and ask the person to repeat himself. Perhaps you misunderstood, or the person said something in haste, had an off day, or just needed to blow some steam. By giving the person a second chance, you clarify intent and avoid being the accuser in the other person's eyes.

Take It Through the Chain of Command

If the person continues to make inappropriate comments after your initial request to stop the remarks, repeat your initial request that he stop and let him know you will notify management and human resources if he continues. At this point, write down the comments and when and where they happened. If need be, you can present the notes to your immediate supervisors, as the

situation warrants. For particularly difficult cases, you might have to take your grievances to increasingly higher levels of management, especially if your immediate supervisor fails to intervene.

Establish Expectations

Use your experience to help your employer take a proactive stance that can prevent co-workers from making inappropriate comments in the future. The American College of Healthcare Executives advocates establishing a clear code of conduct that defines intimidation and violence -- both verbal and non-verbal. The policy should enumerate examples of different types of abuse and explicitly state that these behaviors are not tolerated in the organization. Staff should be trained to identify what is inappropriate, set up procedures for reporting and investigating allegations, and uphold standards for corrective action.

References

- The Credo Company: 3 Ways to Handle an Inappropriate Comment at Work
- Philadelphia Business Journal: When Inappropriate Comments Threaten the Workplace
- Careerealism: How to Handle a Hostile Work Environment
- American College of Healthcare Executives: Preventing and Addressing Workplace Abuse: Inappropriate and Disruptive Behavior

About the Author

Timothea Xi has been writing business and finance articles since 2013. She has worked as an alternative investment adviser in Miami, specializing in managed futures. Xi has also worked as a stockbroker in New York City.

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