**Week 1a: Sexual Harassment at Uber**

*Excerpted from Susan J. Fowler’s 2/19/2017 blog post, “Reflecting On One Very, Very Strange Year At Uber”* <https://www.susanjfowler.com/blog/2017/2/19/reflecting-on-one-very-strange-year-at-uber>

I joined Uber as a site reliability engineer (SRE) back in November 2015, and it was a great time to join as an engineer…. I had the rare opportunity to choose whichever team was working on something that I wanted to be part of.

**Things Started Getting Weird**

…I chose to join the team that worked on my area of expertise, and this is where things started getting weird. On my first official day rotating on the team, my new manager sent me a string of messages over company chat. He was in an open relationship, he said, and his girlfriend was having an easy time finding new partners but he wasn't. He was trying to stay out of trouble at work, he said, but he couldn't help getting in trouble, because he was looking for women to have sex with. It was clear that he was trying to get me to have sex with him, and it was so clearly out of line that I immediately took screenshots of these chat messages and reported him to HR.

Uber was a pretty good-sized company at that time, and I had pretty standard expectations of how they would handle situations like this. I expected that I would report him to HR, they would handle the situation appropriately, and then life would go on - unfortunately, things played out quite a bit differently. When I reported the situation, I was told by both HR and upper management that even though this was clearly sexual harassment and he was propositioning me, it was this man's first offense, and that they wouldn't feel comfortable giving him anything other than a warning and a stern talking-to. Upper management told me that he "was a high performer" (i.e. had stellar performance reviews from his superiors) and they wouldn't feel comfortable punishing him for what was probably just an innocent mistake on his part.

I was then told that I had to make a choice: (i) I could either go and find another team and then never have to interact with this man again, or (ii) I could stay on the team, but I would have to understand that he would most likely give me a poor performance review when review time came around, and there was nothing they could do about that. I remarked that this didn't seem like much of a choice, and that I wanted to stay on the team because I had significant expertise in the exact project that the team was struggling to complete (it was genuinely in the company's best interest to have me on that team), but they told me the same thing again and again. One HR rep even explicitly told me that it wouldn't be retaliation if I received a negative review later because I had been "given an option."[[1]](#footnote-1) I tried to escalate the situation but got nowhere with either HR or with my own management chain (who continued to insist that they had given him a stern-talking to and didn't want to ruin his career over his "first offense").

So I left that team…. I ended up joining a brand-new SRE team that gave me a lot of autonomy, and I found ways to be happy and do amazing work...

**Others’ Experiences**

Over the next few months, I began to meet more women engineers in the company. As I got to know them, and heard their stories, I was surprised that some of them had stories similar to my own… [some] about reporting the exact same manager I had… long before I had even joined the company. It became obvious that both HR and management had been lying about this being "his first offense," and it certainly wasn't his last. Within a few months, he was reported once again for inappropriate behavior, and those who reported him were told it was still his "first offense…"

Myself and a few of the women who had reported him in the past decided to all schedule meetings with HR to insist that something be done. In my meeting, the rep I spoke with told me that he had never been reported before, he had only ever committed one offense (in his chats with me), and that none of the other women who they met with had anything bad to say about him, so no further action could or would be taken. It was such a blatant lie that there was really nothing I could do. There was nothing any of us could do…

**The Leather Jackets**

Every time something ridiculous happened, every time a sexist email was sent, I'd sent a short report to HR just to keep a record going. Things came to a head with one particular email chain from the director of our engineering organization concerning leather jackets that had been ordered for all of the SREs… [The women] received an email saying that no leather jackets were being ordered for [them] because there were not enough women in the organization to justify placing an order. [Defending his decision, the director said] if we women really wanted equality, then we should realize we were getting equality by not getting the leather jackets.… They had gotten a significant discount on the men's jackets but not on the women's… and it wouldn't be equal or fair… to give the women leather jackets that cost a little more than the men's jackets…

I forwarded this absurd chain of emails to HR, and they requested to meet with me... The HR rep began the meeting by asking me if I had noticed that \*I\* was the common theme in all of the reports I had been making… if I had ever considered that I might be the problem. I pointed out that everything I had reported came with extensive documentation and I clearly wasn't the instigator (or even a main character) in the majority of them - she [said] that there was absolutely no record in HR of any of the incidents I was claiming I had reported (…I reminded her I had email and chat records…). She then asked me if women engineers at Uber were friends and talked a lot…how often we communicated, what we talked about, what email addresses we used to communicate, which chat rooms we frequented, etc. - an absurd and insulting request that I refused to comply with. Our meeting ended with her berating me about keeping email records of things and [telling] me it was unprofessional to report things via email to HR.

Less than a week after this absurd meeting, my manager… told me I was on very thin ice for reporting his manager to HR. California is an at-will employment state, he said, which means we can fire you if you ever do this again. I told him that was illegal, and he replied that he had been a manager for a long time, he knew what was illegal, and threatening to fire me for reporting things to HR was not illegal. I reported his threat immediately after the meeting to both HR and to the CTO: they both admitted that this was illegal[[2]](#footnote-2), but none of them did anything. (I was told … that they didn't do anything because the manager who threatened me "was a high performer").

I had a new job offer in my hands less than a week later.

1. This is false. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. At will employees can be fired for any reason EXCEPT for membership in a protected class (e.g., sex, race, religion, marital status, veteran status, etc.) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)