

## SHOULD I REPORT HIM?

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Leaving her retail position at a popular upscale clothing outlet for an office internship at a high tech company was a dream come true for Carmen Nicolli. As she walked into the office for the first day of her job, she realized that this internship was an opportunity to show off her capabilities in graphic design. Within the first month of work, she embraced the relaxed office culture of alcohol after 3 p.m. on Fridays and dinner with foreign coworkers from the London office. One Wednesday night, after celebrating the company's 100<sup>th</sup> hire, her supervisor invited another intern and her to dinner. This gesture seemed harmless, until she accepted and began to sense his real intentions. While waiting for the elevator with her boss, she became wary when he mentioned that he was going through a difficult divorce. This personal confession before dinner made Carmen feel extremely uncomfortable. Throughout the dinner, she felt alone, like a trapped child, as if nobody was there to listen if she protested. An overwhelming sense of relief washed over her as dinner ended. The boss drove the two interns back to the parking lot at work where they had left their cars. However, as Carmen was getting out of her boss's car, he mentioned to her for the third time that he could give her a ride home instead of driving herself home. In the minutes following her refusal, she felt an overwhelming sense of fear and exploitation. As she walked back to the safety of her car alone, she began sobbing.

The following day, she walked into the office feeling dirty and manipulated wondering if anybody else was aware of her boss's behavior towards his interns. Upon passing him in the hall, she immediately noticed that he was wearing the same clothes as the day before, suggesting that he most likely did not go home. In the weeks following this incident, her boss continued to attempt to manipulate her with uncomfortable requests such as trying on a t-shirt designed for a model to wear at a company trade show, as well as asking her out to dinner even after multiple refusals. Carmen shared her experiences with her family and closest friends who agreed that her boss's actions could be construed as sexual harassment.

Upon reflection, Carmen realized that her boss struggled with the boundaries of work and personal life. In the midst of a failing marriage perhaps he had tried to find the affirmation at work that he could not find at home. Carmen should have recognized the first warning sign

during her interview. He did not ask about Carmen's experience using graphic design programs. Instead, they had a conversation about their hobbies, which to Carmen felt more personal than professional.

Of course, the intention of such a question could have been directed at assessing how well rounded the prospective intern was. Sometimes young people can be too focused on school, for example, and limit themselves. The interviewer might have attempted to use such a question to make the prospective intern feel more at ease or as a measure of "fit." High tech companies often have strong cultures where some people fit and others don't. Hobbies or interests could be legitimate indications of one's ability to relate to certain clients or coworkers.

The dinner mentioned above would have been acceptable if Carmen felt her boss's intention was to welcome the two interns into the company. People observing the dinner would not have noticed Carmen's internal conflict. Her co-workers did not know of her discomfort when her boss approached her. Ever since he mentioned his impending divorce, she felt that his seeming kindness and friendliness reflected his ulterior motives.

After the night out to dinner, the two interns talked the situation over. The other intern queried why Carmen was not able to relax and enjoy the dinner. Carmen explained to her their boss told Carmen that he was getting a divorce. The other intern immediately understood their boss's intention of plying them with alcohol. The other intern then shared with Carmen similar incidents that she herself had experienced with their boss.

Though Carmen had good relationships with her coworkers in the small office environment, she had not discussed the situation with them. She also did not report the incident to the Human Resource Manager for fear of retaliation and humiliation. She was afraid her story would not be perceived as a form of sexual harassment, but as a malicious attack coming from an intern to hurt the career of the Vice President of the company. Lastly, Carmen did not have enough supporting evidence for his actions to be considered an offense. She resolved to stay quiet about the incident even though he continued to invite her to dinner after work.

Carmen tried to suppress the fear of her boss and her other emotions. She wondered if she suffered bouts of anxiety and moodiness longer because she was a woman. She recalled the often heard phrase, "Oh, you are only being an emotional woman, get over it." Carmen contemplated voicing her fears to another supervisor or confronting her boss directly. Perhaps her boss was just superficially flirting with her. Although Carmen viewed it as inappropriate, perhaps it was just boorish behavior rather than vicious harassment.

Looking back, Carmen accepted that events such as this affected her emotionally. She tended to not let go of these troubling emotions. Taking a step back and analyzing her experience allowed her to recognize her emotional response to uncomfortable situations that arose at work. She concluded that she often allowed the negative emotions bottled up inside to grow and affect the way she saw herself and the way she interacted with others.

Carmen realized that she had to find another job rather than subject herself to someone she perceived as a creep. The stress was too much. She ultimately knew that she would not be comfortable just trying to take it in stride and pretending it did not happen. If she stayed at her internship, she would have to report her boss. However, it might be easier to just go work somewhere else. What should she do?

## **Questions**

1. Do you think that what Carmen experienced was sexual harassment or just bad behavior by her boss? Why or why not?
2. Do you think Carmen should report her boss to HR, confront him and ask him stop or just quit? Support your position.
3. If you were in Carmen's situation, what kind of coping mechanisms would you use to handle the stress?
4. Is Carmen's concern about possible retaliation reasonable under the law? Why or why not?
5. Give two recommendations on what organizations can do to prevent situations like this from occurring.