

# Taking Care of Each Other

*How to handle harassment and inappropriate comments*

## PURPOSE AND GOALS

It's the unfortunate reality that many of us have experienced situations that have made us uncomfortable or even unsafe at work, either from customers or coworkers.

This can appear in the form of sexual harassment, inappropriate language and/or discrimination based on gender, race, age, religion, and disability, etc.

We want to start a discussion to help in those uncomfortable times and provide phrases to remember to help create boundaries that keep folks safe.

## IT'S NOT OKAY

First, is to remember that there's no excuse for these behaviors. It's common to write off or minimize the harm that someone's words can have.

We tell ourselves things like "that person is just a product of their time/generation" or that it's part of their culture. Or that it's just "that person's sense of humor." But the reality is that there aren't any excuses for someone saying something that's inappropriate, rude, or crosses a line. It also doesn't make what you feel okay. If your younger sibling, relative, or child were treated the same way is it still okay or excusable?

## BE PREPARED

No one goes into a conversation with a coworker or customer expecting to be harassed or having their boundaries crossed. It is always jarring and will throw you off, but there are practices to take and phrases to practice or keep at the ready for when these moments do occur.

Be direct with a customer who is starting to cross the line. Shut down inappropriate comments immediately. Giving them the opportunity to second think what they've just said and an opportunity to correct themselves is a great place to start.

***“Are you taking me seriously?”***

***“Are we talking about the (x subject)?”***

Be direct and on point; don't engage when they cross the line. It's okay to be firm with the customer. Outline the conversation you're there to engage in and don't feed into anything outside of that. Use phrases like “That's outside the scope of what I'm here to talk about.”

If you need to create a greater boundary, try to distance yourself from them. Move to a different communication platform i.e. email

If a customer starts getting aggressive or abusive, give them a 3 strike rule.

***“If you're going to keep speaking to me like that, I am going to have to end this call.”***

## **TAKE A BREATH**

Not every customer will cross the line, but when they do, it throws you off. It's hard to find that line of shutting down comments like that while still doing your job. But, having a response to inappropriate comments as ready as you can do any other part of your job is important. Saying what you need to say without hesitation and with confidence will help establish that boundary.

If you can, step away to collect yourself. Use phrases like

***“I have to step away, but I'll call you back in (x amount of time)”***

***“... but (x co-worker) can call you back and help further”***

***“I need to end this call, but I'd be happy to continue to help over email”***

Be sure to talk about your experience with your manager and possibly with your team. Use their support to boost your confidence when you make contact with the customer again or create a plan for the next person to help them the next time around.

And it's okay to step away and let someone else step in. Everyone has different boundaries and handles customers differently. If they have the context of a customer who may say some inappropriate comments, they'll be able to shut it down sooner and easier than when you didn't. There is no weakness in having to step away.

## WHEN A COWORKER CROSSES A BOUNDARY

Be straightforward when addressing the issue or concern

*“Are we carrying ourselves in a way that reflects our values as a team?”*

*“This conversation is not appropriate and I would appreciate it if we stayed on task.”*

*“The way you are speaking to me is not respectful, nor professional.”*

If you need to remove yourself from the situation immediately, consider discussing the matter with a manager or colleague.

Send an email or schedule a phone call to discuss why their behavior was out of line.

## WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU'VE CROSSED A BOUNDARY

Being called out for crossing boundaries-especially when it's unintentional does not feel good. You may feel a range of emotions, but don't let these emotions rule how you respond

### Do

- Take a breath
- Listen
- Sincerely apologize
- Strive to do better in the future

### Don't

- Think this makes you a bad person
- Make it about you
- Overdo your apology