Creating a Harassment-Free Work Environment for Women in Coaching

In the July 2009 issue of the Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching (Vol. 9, No. 3), Gretchen Kerr laid bare "the touchy subject of harassment and bullying" as experienced by female coaches, a subject barely mentioned in the literature in comparison to data available on the experiences of female athletes. In a study conducted with female coaches, she found that those who continue to coach in spite of harassment generally remain silent, fearing the loss of hard-fought-for positions. Others leave coaching, and still others resist recruitment to the profession altogether. It's a lose–lose situation.

In this issue, Gretchen spells out what sport organizations can (and must) do to replace a culture of workplace harassment with one that ensures physical, psychological, and social safety and security. She cites the appalling costs of harassment—psychological for the female coach and financial for the organization. In reviewing existing harassment prevention programs, she points out that all address appropriate coach treatment of female athletes; none cover harassment of female coaches. She details how organizations can develop and implement policies against harassment, stresses the importance of education, addresses personal motivation to change behaviours, and expands on power as the root cause of harassment. Last, she offers a series of recommendations designed "to shift the focus of educational programs from a 'how not to harass' approach to a values-based approach."

There can be little excuse for inaction if sport in Canada is to attract and retain women in coaching while ensuring an environment that is conducive to their creativity and productivity—in other words, a workplace that is harassment free, surely an attainable goal. Achieving it begins with acknowledging harassment's existence, deploring it, and acting to eliminate it. — Sheila Robertson

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APRIL 2010 FEATURE

Creating a Harassment-Free Work Environment for Women in Coaching

by Gretchen Kerr

Inclusive, harassment-free workplaces are essential for ensuring the health and productivity of both the employees and the organization. Only when individuals feel safe and secure—physically, psychologically, and socially—do we see employee satisfaction, productivity, retention, and creativity. The purpose of this article is to address ways in which more inclusive, harassment-free working environments can be created for women in coaching. Although healthy workplaces are also important for men, the focus here is specifically on approaches to help women in efforts to reach gender equity in coaching.

It is important to examine ways in which the workplace culture can be enhanced specifically for female coaches for several reasons. First, there is a lack of female coaches at all levels of sport and particularly at the high performance level, a problem that has been well documented (Acosta and Carpenter 2004; Coakley 1998; Marshall 2001). Women's progress in coaching roles has not followed other societal trends toward gender equity, and despite the growing participation rates of girls and women in sport, the number of women in coaching positions has not increased. Recent data suggest that only one-third of the head

coaching positions of women-only teams in Canada are held by women, a particularly notable figure when one considers that over half of sport participants are female (Kerr, Marshall, Sharp and Stirling 2006).

Gender inequity in coaching has been attributed to such causes as a lack of opportunities for women, conflict with domestic responsibilities, inadequate rewards and opportunities for advancement, and a culture of idealized masculinity in competitive sport (Demers 2004; Hall 1996; Mercier and Werthner 2001; Robertson 2000). It has also been suggested that harassment in the workplace may prevent women from entering coaching as a career or contribute to their departure from coaching (Kerr 2009). This article focuses on potential ways to prevent harassment in coaching.

Harassment refers to unwanted or coerced behaviours that are in violation of an individual's human rights. It represents an abuse of power, authority, and trust (IOC 2007). In 1994, the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS) defined harassment as any "comment, conduct, or gesture directed toward an individual or a group of individuals which is insulting, intimidating, humiliating, malicious, degrading or offensive." Harassment occurs when a person in a position of authority, power, or trust engages in these behaviours. Harassment may take many forms, including but not limited to sexual, ethnic, physical, emotional, gender, religious, socioeconomic, racial, and homophobic harassment. The term "harassment" is often used interchangeably with "bullying" and "abuse". However, harassment differs from these other activities because of the basis of the relationship in which the harassment occurs (Stirling 2008). More specifically, harassment occurs when one individual in the relationship is in a position of ascribed authority over the other individual such as between an athlete and a coach, a head coach and an assistant coach, or an employer and a coach.

In spite of the plethora of research on harassment experienced by athletes from their coaches, surprisingly little research exists on the harassment experiences of coaches. In a qualitative study of female national-level coaches, seven out of eight coaches reported being harassed on the basis of their gender or sexuality by their male counterparts who either were in more senior positions or had longer tenures as highly competitive coaches (Kerr 2009). Research in the general workplace supports this finding with consistent evidence that harassment is more likely to occur when there is an imbalance of power based upon sex or experience on the job (Acker 1990). Within sport, McKay (1999) reported that virtually all women in coaching and sport administration positions have experienced or witnessed sexual harassment in the workplace. Additionally, the sport culture has been characterized as homophobic, thus contributing to experiences of harassment based upon sexual orientation (Demers 2006; Pronger 2005). It is important to emphasize at this point that most of the harassment literature in sport focuses on sexual harassment, and to a much lesser degree on harassment based on sexual orientation. However, research is lacking on other aspects of diversity. In fact, Shogan (2007, p.68) writes, "Despite high-profile cases of racism in sport, and many day-to-day instances, the sport ethics bureaucracy has yet to respond in any systemic way" to harassment based upon race. The same is true with harassment based upon ability or disability, religion, and ethnicity, among others.

Although there is limited empirical research on the prevalence of harassment of females in coaching, there is no reason to think that it is not problematic given its prevalence in other occupational domains. Research on sexual harassment in the workplace, for example, indicates that as many as 50 per cent of women are affected by this behaviour (Gruber 1997; Barak 1997; Konik and Cortina 2008; Rayner, Hoel, and Cooper 2002; Zapf, Einarsen, Hoel, and Vartia 2003). Further, 25 to 66 per cent of sexual minorities have encountered workplace discrimination because of their sexual orientation (Konik and Cortina 2008). It is conceivable that experiences of harassment occur more frequently in coaching than in many other workplace settings due to the nature of the sport context. For example, previous literature consistently indicates that females who work in traditional male work environments often experience more harassment than those who work in female-dominated environments (Gutek, Cohen, and Konrad 1990); coaching has traditionally been, and continues to be, dominated by males. Furthermore, the traditional hegemonic culture of competitive sport that idealizes power, toughness, competitiveness, and aggressiveness makes for an environment ripe for harassment based upon gender and sexuality. Sport has been characterized by a "heterosexual imperative", the need for and expectation of heterosexuality in order to participate and excel in sport (Shogan 1999), thus making the sport culture more vulnerable to harassment based on sexuality.

Previous research also indicates that harassment is more common in work cultures that emphasize the body and physical prowess (Lopez, Hodson, and Roscigno 2009; Ragins and Scandura 1995). Although the work of coaches is not necessarily physically demanding in the sense of hard physical labour, it exists in a culture that focuses on the body and physicality.

Costs of harassment

In addition to the extraordinary personal costs, both psychological and financial, of harassment, the costs to organizations are also substantial. Incidents of harassment have been associated with absenteeism, tardiness, turnover, illness, and psychological stress for all parties involved. If litigation is involved, financial costs for the organization can be crippling (Hanisch 1997; Knapp and Kustis 1997). It is important to note that victims of workplace harassment are often more likely to leave the organization than report the harassment and follow through on required procedures (Eller 1990). If this is also true of coaching environments, this may help to explain the attrition rates of female coaches; most women leave the profession within the first five years. These consequences of harassment make preventive initiatives imperative.

Current harassment prevention programs in sport

Within sport, a number of policy initiatives have been developed to address harassment prevention. CAAWS developed a harassment policy in 1994 that has been adopted by numerous sport organizations. In 1998, the Harassment and Abuse Collective published Speak Out!… Act Now!, a handbook that outlines the importance of harassment policies within sport organizations. The Coaching Association of Canada (CAC) has published a code of ethics, principles and ethical standards that addresses the need and obligation to create a respectful climate within sport. Additionally, Coaches of Canada advocates for harassment-free environments through its code of ethics.

With respect to educational initiatives, existing programs for coaches focus on their conduct with their athletes; they identify harassing behaviours or focus on appropriate coaching conduct. The Respect in Sport program, for example, focuses on educating coaches about harassment and bullying but only in reference to their conduct with their athletes. Similarly, the "Make Ethical Decisions" module of CAC's National Coaching Certification Program targets the behaviour of the coach in relation to her or his athletes. With both of these educational programs, one could draw inferences about ethical and respectful conduct with other stakeholders in sport beyond athletes, but neither program explicitly addresses harassment or harassment prevention within the coaching ranks. Additionally, the extent to which these educational programs are empirically based and evaluated is questionable.

Given the glaring absence of harassment prevention programs in the coaching realm, we must look to other sectors that have made progress in this area. Much has been written about such programs in business literature. The next section will examine what the coaching world can potentially learn from the business sector to create harassment-free workplaces.

Creating a harassment-free workplace

Policy
Researchers and practitioners have argued that a solid, well-communicated policy against harassment is one of the most important strategies for addressing it (Bell, Campbell Quick, and Cycyota 2002). Recommendations have been made to publicize the policy as broadly as possible, including a posting on the organization's website and bulletin boards and inclusion in employee handbooks (Mais and Masterson 2007). In spite of this recommendation, empirical research on the efficacy of harassment policies for reducing or preventing incidences of harassment is lacking (Perry, Kulik, and Field 2009). Additionally, harassment policies have been criticized on the grounds that they neglect interpersonal responsibility to prevent harassment and instead focus on bureaucratic needs and legal obligations (Shogan 2007).

Education

Most harassment prevention programs are reactive rather than proactive (Bell et al. 2002). A reactive program is one that emerges in response to concerns or complaints about harassment or in response to mandated obligations (Sample 2007). A proactive program addresses harassment before it occurs and takes into account the organizational culture that may contribute to potential problems (Bell et al. 2002). The extant literature consistently indicates that it is best to position harassment prevention education as an essential part of the employer's commitment to continuing education and to an organizational culture that values professional development (Sample 2007). For educational initiatives to be effective, the leadership of the organization needs to set expectations for and support professional development, including harassment prevention, in tangible ways (Bell et al. 2002; Perry et al. 2009).

Before implementing harassment prevention programs, it is important to attend to individual characteristics that are known to affect learning and potential attitudinal and behavioural changes (Perry et al. 2009). Such characteristics as the learners' motivation to attend the educational session, their willingness to change their attitudes and behaviour, and their self-efficacy should be assessed pre-training and used to inform the design and delivery of the program, as these characteristics will certainly affect the success of the intervention.

Interestingly, while the practitioner literature recommends mandatory training, the relevant research literature suggests that more positive effects are achieved through voluntary training. This is one example of the gap cited in the harassment literature between research and practice; a substantial body of academic literature addresses theory and research on general training principles and strategies but, for a variety of reasons, this literature has not been transferred to practice. Clearly, there is a need to develop harassment prevention training based upon empirical findings (Perry et al. 2009), and this holds true for programs in sport as well.

Too often, harassment prevention training consists of a one-shot workshop, lecture or online module. It is unreasonable to think that this brief exposure to harassment prevention will go beyond enhancing awareness to affect attitudes and behaviours. The intended outcome of any harassment prevention program is to effect behaviour change—to teach people new skills of interaction that are more pro-social and inclusive. As with any other skill acquisition process, learning principles should be applied (Perry et al. 2009). More specifically, recommendations are made for the establishment of learning goals before the educational program. Then, regular and ongoing education is needed, coupled with the provision of constructive feedback. Learners need opportunities to transfer their newly acquired knowledge to practice while receiving feedback on their efforts. Recommendations are also made for the delivery of maintenance interventions such as refresher training sessions (Perry et al. 2009).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, harassment prevention programs may be best delivered if done in the context of the root cause of harassment, namely power. Too often, the provision of training alone may create a false sense of security that something is being done about harassment. However, without addressing power relations, the conditions of the organization that give rise to harassment remain unaddressed (Bisom-Rapp 2001). Most educational interventions are akin to "anti-harassment" training; they teach people about the behaviours that constitute harassment and provide lists of behaviours that are considered to be inappropriate and will not be tolerated in the organization. Rather than contextualizing the learning, most programs offer a list of do's and don'ts (Smiley-Marquez 1999). This approach runs the risk of communicating a negative expectancy, a message that "we assume harassment will occur" so everyone should or will receive training. Such a message is offensive to many. Additionally, given that most workplace harassment occurs against women and sexual minorities, anti-harassment programs may incite backlash against these individuals, causing more harm to those who are most vulnerable. Instead, the literature recommends communicating a positive expectancy and creating values-based programs that address pro-social, inclusive behaviours. To eradicate harassment from the workplace, educational programs need to focus on the positive use of power and how power can be negotiated between people. Framing programs with the ethical use of power has implications for all relationships of power—male and female, coach and athlete, head coach and assistant coach, and so on (Tomlinson and Strachan 1996). Previous literature suggests that when balances of power are achieved in interpersonal relationships,

experiences of harassment decline (Eller 1990). In conclusion, addressing power dynamics and the ethical use of power may better translate into healthy sport environments than teaching people not to harass.

Research

It is surprising that in spite of the existence of harassment training programs for some time now, we know very little about when, why, and under which circumstances harassment training is effective (Newman, Jackson and Baker 2003; Perry et al. 2009). In the sexual harassment literature in particular, this lack of attention to evaluative research has been cited as a "glaring omission" (Fitzgerald and Shullman 1993, p.16). Clearly, evaluative research on educational programs is imperative: Do existing programs meet their learning outcomes? How are these measured? Interestingly, although the need for evaluative research is cited frequently in the research literature, it is not addressed in the literature targeted to practitioners of harassment training (Perry et al. 2009). This is surprising given that organizational leaders are unlikely to devote resources to programs that may not achieve what they purport to achieve.

It is also important to note that, to date, evaluative research on the efficacy of the various modes of delivery of harassment education is lacking. For example, how effective are lecture and workshop formats, role-playing, and online educational programs? Research suggests that each method of dissemination has its benefits and that the content, format, and delivery of the educational program should be tailored to meet individual needs. The absence of evaluative research, however, limits the ability to recommend one method over another. Online programs in particular are growing in popularity because they are "the simplest and least expensive way to reach the most people" (Williams June 2009, p.A.10). However, concerns have been raised about online programs being a "one size fits all" approach (Williams June 2009) that do not provide the opportunity to build an understanding of the complexity of issues and the nuances of harassment (Perry et al. 2009; Sample 2007). Despite their popularity, no evaluative research exists on the efficacy of web-based programs.

Researchers have proposed several recommendations for evaluating harassment training programs (Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick 2006). To assess learning and attitudes, one suggestion is to implement surveys or case studies to measure knowledge and attitudes about harassment before and after training. To assess potential behaviour change as a result of the education, pre- and post-surveys about one's own and others' harassing behaviours and the organizational climate could be implemented (Williams June 2009). And finally, the number of complaints received before and after the educational intervention could be compared.

Summary and recommendations

To attract and retain women in coaching and to ensure an environment that is conducive to creativity and productivity, the workplace must be harassment-free. Currently, existing harassment prevention policies and education programs in sport focus almost exclusively on coaches' conduct with respect to their athletes, which, of course, is of critical importance. However, given the experiences of harassment faced by female coaches and the attrition of women from coaching, more needs to be done to prevent harassment in the coaching ranks. Although there is a vast literature in the business sector about policies and educational programs to prevent harassment, little is known about the efficacy of such initiatives. Clearly, empirical evaluative research is needed on which policies and which formats of education are efficacious. Additionally, most of the existing work has addressed harassment based upon gender and, to a lesser degree, sexuality; further research is needed on other forms of harassment. Finally, recommendations are made to shift the focus of educational programs from a "how not to harass" approach to a values-based approach that is framed by power relations—the root cause of harassment. More specific recommendations to help organizations address harassment within coaching are as follows:

1. Publicize harassment policies broadly and frequently.
2. Broaden discussions on harassment within the coach–athlete relationship to include harassment in coaching.
3. Frame anti-harassment education with discussions of power and power relations within interpersonal relationships.

4. Use existing research on harassment prevention and effective training initiatives to inform the content of educational programs.
5. Consider aspects of the organizational culture that may contribute to the occurrence of harassment.
6. Tailor educational programs according to the unique characteristics of the organizational culture and the individual characteristics of the participants.
7. Address positive, pro-social behaviours rather than a list of "don'ts" in educational programs.
8. Provide opportunities for ongoing and frequent dialogue about power relations in sport.
9. Integrate harassment prevention programs within an organizational culture of continuing education and professional development.
10. Evaluate the effectiveness of all harassment-related policy and educational initiatives.

About the author

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