

Submission 341

I commenced a new role in a government organisation in November, [REDACTED]. My Office would have a small staff but work alongside a larger and established branch of [REDACTED] where the culture was 'blokey' and there was a focus on delivering on targets rather than workplace culture.

From the time I started in the role, one male colleague (AB) became overly familiar towards me, frequently enquiring about my weekend plans, my state of health and fitness, my relationship and commenting on my body, my appearance and how hard I was working, telling me to 'take it easy' and come to drinks or other celebrations with him. He was married with [REDACTED] children.

My long term relationship ended in May, [REDACTED] about 6mo after I started working in this role, and my colleague became much more attentive and interested in me from that time onwards.

One evening he drunk dialled me and was up for a long chat. Many other nights he would call me on his way to the carpark and want to talk to me for his drive home. Another night after a work function, he called me when I was alone in a taxi heading home and wanted us to have phone sex, asking me if I'd ever done that before, telling me he'd always thought about masturbating with me on the end of the line.

I told my direct manager, a [REDACTED], what was happening and he looked frustrated and unsurprised. He told me that a couple of other junior female staff had brought similar stories to his attention about the same colleague. One particular staff member had documented a list of days, times, behaviours and how she felt about dozens of interactions that were inappropriate and made her feel unsafe. She ended up leaving this branch without making a formal complaint.

My boss said he had spoken to my colleague about his behaviour, to which AB appeared 'completely surprised.' My boss instructed him to think of women not just as 'carers or conquests, but also as colleagues.' He also told him to get a female mentor.

When I told AB a few weeks later in July, [REDACTED] that I had gone on a date with a guy I really liked, he became visibly irritated and later that day was openly aggressive towards me at an Exec meeting in front of [REDACTED] other staff. I went to his office and said 'never speak like that to me again,' and for some months he kept his distance.

By September, [REDACTED] however, he was back to his standard behaviour: coming in to my office at the end of the day and looking me up and down, commenting on outfits I chose to wear to after-hours work functions, and trying to convince me I should go away with him on site tours for work. I declined politely but never told him where to go.

I started to find ways to avoid sitting next to him in meetings, and stopped walking past his office (three doors down from mine) so that I wouldn't see him. When he was speaking to me inappropriately, I would ask about his wife, his children, try and change the subject.

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] On my final meeting with my manager, he acknowledged that he did not do enough to maintain or improve the culture in the branch where I worked, and that he should not have appointed AB and two of his other colleagues without a transparent interview process.

On January, [REDACTED], I was at [REDACTED] as a guest of the organisers and representing the government position I hold. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] At the end of the day, I was standing with two guests [REDACTED] when AB approached me.

He was definitely intoxicated, and tried to kiss and hug me. He told me how beautiful I was, and mentioned 'isn't it sad that we work so close by to each other but we have to come all the way to [REDACTED] to spend time together.'

I introduced him to my guests, both of whom are female stakeholders of Government and were sober and appalled by his behaviour. Once he left, they asked who AB was and I explained he was a colleague and that this behaviour was not unusual for him.

Soon after, he tried to call me twice, and then send me a text message: "hey, you still here?" Followed by another message "we should hook up, where are you?" I did not respond and felt embarrassed and humiliated that this had occurred in public in front of women I respect. I was worried people might think we were in a sexual relationship.

The next day, I went to the Executive Director of the branch to tell him (as a courtesy) that I wanted to report this behaviour to our new DepSec. The ED said he was 'surprised' to hear that AB had behaved this way, and I asked "are you really?" to which he replied, "well, yes and no. I'm surprised he did it in public."

The ED then went on said that AB was 'mission critical' to the organisation and that he had been a 'flight risk' last year when there was uncertainty about the permanence of his role. The ED said he was "no good at the people and culture stuff" but that he had heard that some people thought that there was a "bit of a blokey culture" in his branch.

On [REDACTED] January, I met with my new Deputy Secretary and informed him of the events from the evening before. I offered unconditional support and asked how he could help, I asked if I could meet with HR staff to determine what my options were. He immediately introduced me to the Business Manager so she could recommend a point of contact in HR.

I met with an HR staff member the following Monday, [REDACTED] and relayed my story. [REDACTED] she referred the matter to her manager. I met with him three days later and immediately was greeted by a supportive, understanding and professional man. He and his HR colleague outlined options for me that ranged from doing nothing to progressing my allegations to a formal complaint. They also carefully explained what the potential outcomes might be.

After consideration, I elected to progress my allegations to a formal complaint. I provided a statement, screenshots of text messages from AB, witness statements from my two guests, and asked a former direct report of AB and my former manager to provide statements.

The Secretary of my new Dept had called me to say he had 'zero tolerance' for workplace misconduct and that he would deal with AB directly. My own manager continued to offer support and guidance where required.

On [REDACTED] February, I was informed that AB had been asked to leave both the department and the public service altogether, and was being given a role for 6 weeks as part of a settlement and his confidentiality agreement. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

The following week at the all-staff meeting, our ED spent 15 minutes informing >100 staff that AB had been 'handpicked by the Secretary' to perform a special role 'offline,' one that was interpreted by many as a reward for his amazing ability to deliver in his previous [REDACTED] role.

Then a week later, the ED went on sick leave for an indeterminate amount of time and my manager informed me that he would not be coming back. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

It's now [REDACTED] since I started in this role, and [REDACTED] since the leadership team has been significantly disrupted, and while there are rumours and gossip circulating about AB's rapid disappearance from staff, and about the ED's coincidental leave, I am finally feeling safe to come to work.

It's an immense relief to know that your leaders walk the talk on how workplace culture needs to be. I was treated with seriousness, respect, professionalism and kindness by my Deputy Secretary, the Department Secretary, the Minister's Office, and by the terrific HR team.

However, there is much more to do around communicating to staff when someone has been terminated because of workplace misconduct. Junior staff needs to know these processes can actually work!