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PUR 6416—Public Relations and Fund Raising

State of sexual harassment between donors and fundraisers

April 21, 2013

Abstract

Nonprofit organizations, like any organization, are subject to having sexual harassment take place in their work environment. Another dynamic is added with nonprofit organizations between fundraisers and donors, as sexual harassment can take place here as well, still putting the organization at risk even though the harassment is coming from the donor, an outside source. Throughout this study the researcher will attempt to examine the state of sexual harassment in nonprofit organizations among fundraisers and donors. A survey of members of the Association of Fundraising professionals (AFP) will be conducted, specifically targeting members of the Greater Los Angeles, Chicago and Greater New York AFP chapters. Drawing on previous literature the study will ask questions related to the power of sexual harassment and the lessons that previous researchers have learned while conducting their studies of sexual harassment. After administering the survey and gathering the data the researcher hopes to discover trends across the different organizations in how fundraisers react to sexual harassment. Although, the researcher does not expect there to be similar guidelines set throughout the industry in regards to handling sexual harassment between donors and fundraisers. Finally, this study aims to fill a gap in the fundraising body of knowledge, as there has been little research on sexual harassment between fundraisers and donors, an important topic for professional fundraisers.

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Purpose of the Study

Sexual harassment is an issue prevalent in our society, towards both men and women. This issue, while still relevant, is not a new, with laws and regulations put in place in 1980 under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 1990). This law helps to define what sexual harassment is and what types of situations can be considered sexual harassment. Sexual harassment is defined as “unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature” (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission). Within the workplace a victim of sexual harassment is able to press charges against their employer or harasser after an incident takes place because of the laws put in place to combat sexual harassment.

Turning towards the fundraising profession, sexual harassment can take place not only in the workplace but also between a fundraiser, who is an employee of the organization, and a donor, who is not an employee of the organization. Although a donor is not an employee of the nonprofit organization for which the fundraiser works they are still very important to the nonprofit organization, and the organizations financial success. The nonprofit organizations fundraiser is charged with the responsibility of developing meaningful relationships with the donors of the organization, to help and enrich their experience of donating.

The relationships that fundraisers build with donors, specifically donors of major gifts, can help determine the size of the gift, as well as if the donor gives a gift to the nonprofit at all (Hall, 2010a). For this reason the relationships and friendships that fundraisers build with donors is extremely important. Unfortunately, the friendships that fundraisers make with donors can sometimes blur the lines between what is appropriate and what is not, causing sexual harassment to take place. This is not only because the fundraiser works closely with donors, but also because

the fundraiser is extremely grateful and accommodating to the donors, which can lead the donors to believe that certain inappropriate actions are acceptable, and not inappropriate (Hall, 2010b). One fundraising consultant went as far to say that “sexually charged incidents are so common that ‘there should be a class on the sexual politics of fundraising’”. (Hall, 2010a)

According to Hall (2010b) the fundraiser needs to be proactive in expressing when a comment or action by a donor is inappropriate. Being proactive is a fundraisers first line of defense; unfortunately not all fundraisers are prepared when an event of sexual harassment takes place. Hall (2010c) retells a fundraisers experience in which she was not prepared or expecting to be sexually harassed. After closing a deal for a \$1-million corporate gift, the fundraiser agreed to have dinner with a group of executives, but when it came time for dinner only one of the executives was there. The fundraiser did not think it was a problem because they were familiar with each other and the gentleman knew that she was married with children, unfortunately the fundraiser became a victim of a sexual attack that evening because she did not expect anything out of the ordinary and she trusted her relationship with the donor (Hall, 2010c). Throughout this example it is evident that donors and fundraisers do make relationships in which they become comfortable with each other, and those relationships are sometimes taken advantage of. While this may sometimes be the case, a fundraiser may be putting themselves in a dangerous situation when alone with donors and need to be aware and conscious of their decisions.

Another problem, in regards to researching and discussing sexual harassment between fundraising professionals and donors is that many fundraisers often ignore or keep quiet about sexual harassment by donors (Hall, 2010b). Hall states that fundraisers don't report sexual harassment from donors because they have a “fear of offending the person or jeopardizing their organization's relationship with a generous benefactor” (2010b, p. 1). The fear of upsetting a

donor is valid but in order to combat sexual harassment between fundraisers and donors, donors need to be made aware when they are being inappropriate. Speaking up when it comes to sexual harassment is important, an organization will not be able to help the fundraiser out of an inappropriate situation and the fundraiser will continue to feel uncomfortable in their work. If speaking up and acting proactively when it comes to sexual harassment does not help alleviate the situation the fundraiser should not take the blame. According to Hall, many fundraisers, specifically females, tend to worry that it was their fault that sexual harassment took place and question how they acted to attract this type of attention (2010b). If a fundraiser takes the advice given by Hall explained above, they should not believe that sexual harassment is their fault and the fundraiser should not blame themselves for the conduct of others (Hall, 2010b)

This topic of sexual harassment between fundraisers and donors has not been explored in-depth throughout fundraising literature, leaving a gap in our scholarly research, which needs to be filled. This study will attempt to fill that gap of knowledge by exploring sexual harassment in a fundraising context. Fundraising is a profession filled with female practitioners, who may be at a higher risk of experiencing sexual harassment when interacting with donors who are outside of the organization. This is not to say that male practitioners are not victims to sexual harassment as well, just that in a female dominated field, the harassment of women is going to be found in higher numbers. In order to discover whether this is a problem or not in the fundraising world a study needs to take place that questions how fundraisers and donors interact with each other.

Literature Review

Throughout this study the researcher will examine sexual harassment among fundraisers and donors, as well as the organizations reaction to these situations. As a theoretical guideline the researcher will look to systems theory and its components to help guide the results of the study.

Systems Theory and Nonprofit Organizations

Fundraising is related to public relations in many ways, and often adopts theories from public relations to be used within fundraising research. Systems theory comes from public relations and concerns itself with understanding “how well or poorly each system functions within its dynamic relationship with other systems.” (Plowman, 2005, p. 839) According to Kelly (1998), systems theory “explains how fund raising impacts society, why charitable organizations have the function, and what contribution the function makes to the effectiveness of such organizations” (p. 325) and legitimizes fundraising as a practice.

Systems theory expands further to include both open and closed systems. Open systems “constantly strive to survive by responding to environmental forces that act on them and to maintain a healthy balance or homeostasis between input and output” (Witmer, 2006, p. 362). Fundraisers and donors work together to maintain the nonprofit organization. The relationship between fundraisers and donors causes the nonprofit organization to be an open system because they are responding to donors, an environmental force outside of their organization. When the relationship between the two is damaged, the repercussions can reverberate back to the nonprofit organization and could potentially harm their mission.

Donors of nonprofit organizations are considered enabling linkages, which means that they help to keep the organization running (Kelly, 1998, p. 337). Without donors, a nonprofit

organization would struggle to exist, and nonprofit organizations need fundraisers to help facilitate a positive relationship with their donors. Unfortunately, this relationship and linkage can be corrupted based on how the donor and fundraiser interact with each other, specifically through cases of sexual harassment.

The role of power in sexual harassment

A relationship between two parties can be damaged when one or both parties feel that they are being sexually harassed. This has been examined in the workplace extensively, between employees of an organization. An important element in sexual harassment that is often explored is the role of power; power is a part of most relationships within a social setting but is taken advantage of in the case of sexual harassment (Popovich & Warren, 2010). A power dynamic can clearly be seen between a supervisor and their employee but less obvious is that between a fundraiser and a donor.

According to McLaughlin, Uggen and Blackstone (2012), sexual harassment sometimes serves as an equalizer towards women in power, and sexual harassment is used because of the ability to control and dominate rather than from sexual desire. Although sexual harassment is not exclusive to females, it is suggested by previous research that workers whom are more vulnerable, like women, are more likely to be harassed (McLaughlin, Uggen & Blackstone, 2012). Understanding the power dynamic involved in sexual harassment is important when an organization is creating policies for dealing with sexual harassment.

Serini, Toth, Wright and Emig (1998) further examine the power dynamic in a public relations setting. These researchers state that “as long as sexual harassment is implicitly or explicitly tolerated in an organization, women will be marginalized in every stratum” (Serini, Toth, Wright & Emig, 1998, p. 214). The power that comes from sexual harassment hinders

women and others whom are harassed within the organization, harming their future careers. This is the main reason that sexual harassment is used by harassers, the power gained in a sexual harassment encounter has a lot to do with gaining a position of power within an organization and little to do with sexuality (Serini, Toth, Wright & Emigh, 1998). Fundraisers are seemingly put into a position of power when receiving a major gift from a donor, if the concept of power in sexual harassment is applied to this situation, a donor using sexual harassment may be attempting to reestablish their power within the relationship.

Reactions to sexual harassment

The reaction of those whom are being sexually harassed and those who witness or are told of the sexual harassment encounter can both help and hurt the situation. Dougherty and Smythe (2004) discovered four different responses that both resist and perpetuate sexual harassment. These four lessons are humor, white men white knights, sexual harassment contested, and victim response (Dougherty & Smythe, 2004). These reactions are important to mention in regards to fundraisers and donors because they were lessons learned from a case study involving an organization and an outsider, whom sexually harassed members of the organization.

Humor was often used as a “coping response for departmental members and, ultimately, as a means of facilitating the unit’s inherent need to restore a sense of normalcy to departmental life” (Dougherty & Smyth, 2004, p. 310). This response was appropriate for the situation described but can discourage someone from reporting sexual harassment in another situation. For example a woman interviewed by Serini, Toth, Wright and Emig (1998) expressed that she may be afraid to come forward because others may say she couldn’t take a joke or that her experience

would be laughed off by others. Humor is a response that can be interpreted in many ways and should be used sparingly and with caution.

Dougherty and Smythe (2004) describe the lesson titled ‘white men white knights’ as the organizations employees creating a positive sense of community for the harassed. In the appropriate setting, the ‘white men white knights’ idea can help to resist sexual harassment, with the members of the organization rallying around the harassed. This lesson though can also perpetuate harassment if handled differently. McLaughlin, Uggen and Blackstone (2012) discovered that this approach perpetuated the idea of sexual harassment throughout their research. These researchers discovered that the men in power positions chose to ask the woman who was being sexually harassed to leave the situation rather than to discipline their client who was sexually harassing their employee, inadvertently letting the client know that his actions were accepted and not inappropriate (McLaughlin, Uggen & Blackstone, 2012). The actions of these men perpetuated sexual harassment, although they might have felt they were protecting their coworker, they were also harming her.

The third lesson learned from Dougherty and Smythe (2004) is called sexual harassment contested. Throughout their study they found that there were clear differences between what men and women considered sexual harassment. Other researchers have also discovered this difference in opinion between men and women. Serini, Toth, Wright and Emig (2009) learned that men are “concerned about women who report sexual harassment inappropriately” (p. 211). Women in this same study also believed that the lack of a clear understanding of sexual harassment hinders the reporting of harassment (Serini, Toth, Wright & Emig, 2009). The ability of sexual harassment to be interpreted differently by the person being harassed and those who view or are told about the

event has brought confusion into how organizations treat sexual harassment, sometimes causing people to believe or not believe that an action should be reported.

The victims' response was the fourth lesson that Dougherty and Smythe (2004) introduced to the reader. Throughout the case study that Dougherty and Smythe (2004) conducted they noticed that the women who were sexually harassed all approached their attacker in a polite manner. This response was also noted in the research of Serini, Toth, Wright and Emig (2009), they found that even under extreme conditions women prefer to quietly deal with a situation, and often don't report it because they are concerned with the consequences that may come from reporting sexual harassment. Within a fundraising setting, this could stem from a fundraiser not wanting to harm the donor's relationship with the organization by causing them to no longer donate.

The lessons mentioned above, are all important elements to look for when researching sexual harassment, in both a positive and negative connotation. As the lessons were all originally linked to a case study involving an outsider harassing members of an organization they are of particular interest to this study and will help guide the research questions developed below.

Research Questions

From the literature on systems theory and previous literature on both sexual harassment in the workplace and within the fundraising environment three research questions were developed:

RQ1: What type of action or reaction to sexual harassment is most common by the fundraiser being harassed and their coworkers?

This first research question attempts to examine how fundraisers act when involved in a situation of sexual harassment, whether they are the person who is being harassed or not. The

four lessons, humor, white men white knights, sexual harassment contested, and victim response, discussed in Dougherty and Smythe's (2004) research can be applied when attempting to answer this research question. Building off of this previous research will be of value when examining the studies results.

RQ2: To what extent do charitable organizations have policies protecting fundraising employees from sexual harassment by donors?

The policies that an organization has in place to protect their employees from sexual harassment are extremely important. While sexual harassment policies are mandated, by law, to be followed within the workplace, and clear repercussions are set, this may not be the case when sexual harassment takes place between an employee and an outside member. As fundraising professionals we are specifically interested in this interaction between fundraisers and donors and what the organizations whom we are employed by or are interested in working for are doing to protect our rights.

RQ3: How does the organization change their relationships with donors when a case of sexual harassment is discovered?

The organizations reaction to an event of sexual harassment is an extremely important element to examine. If an organization does not take action when they learn of sexual harassment it could harm them. An unhappy and uncomfortable fundraiser will most likely produce poor work. As the relationship between fundraisers and donors is extremely important to a nonprofit organization, monitoring and keeping the fundraiser and donor comfortable in this type of situation is ideal for the organization.

Methodology

Throughout this study the researcher attempts to capture the state of sexual harassment among donors and fundraisers. To achieve this the researcher will administer a survey to fundraisers who are members of the Association of Fundraising Professionals (AFP). A survey was chosen because the researcher is attempting to measure policies on sexual harassment between donors and fundraisers, the policies that are put in place to protect fundraisers, and how an organization may change their relationship with a donor when a sexual harassment situation presents itself. Stacks (2011), states that a “survey is a carefully constructed measuring instrument” (p. 224), for this reason a survey fits perfectly with what the researcher is trying to achieve throughout the research.

As AFP is an organization with 96 chapters worldwide, the smallest of these chapters containing 15-50 members, the amount of fundraisers to be contacted for participation in the survey will be scaled down (afpnet.org). Specifically, members of the Greater Los Angeles, Chicago and Greater New York AFP chapters will be chosen to represent the larger population of AFP and fundraising professionals in the United States. This is because they belong to the group of chapters comprised of 401 or more members, giving the research a bigger pool of candidates to choose from. The researcher will contact a total of 900 AFP members from the chapters chosen, in an attempt to conduct an interview. To survey multiple fundraisers from different backgrounds a total of 300 surveys will be administered by mail to each of the three AFP chapters chosen for the population of the study.

The survey will attempt to answer the research questions proposed above in an efficient and appropriate way. The questions asked will be both open-ended and variable based questions. Open-ended questions will be asked because the situations that fundraisers are put in will vary

from organization to organization and it is important to understand this through a qualitative analysis of each situation. The variable based questions will be presented as likert-scales, continuums, and yes or no answers. These questions will then be analyzed using statistical analytics to see what trends exist between the different fundraisers experiences.

The survey will be split into three different sections, measuring different types of variables to answer each of the research questions proposed above. In an attempt to answer RQ1 the researcher will incorporate questions that draw on fundraisers previous experiences with donors. This question also involves the coworkers of the harassed fundraiser, whose reaction to the situation are just as important to understanding sexual harassment in the fundraising profession. The harassed fundraiser will not only be asked about their actions to the sexual harassment interaction but the reactions of their coworkers as well. As fundraisers who may have not been sexually harassed before could be taking the survey, this section will be of great importance to understand their reactions to sexual harassment situations they have witnessed or have been told about.

The researcher will attempt to answer the second research question by asking about sexual harassment policies put in place by the organization. Inquiring about policies that address both sexual harassment between employees of the organization and the fundraisers relationship with donor prospects. The two policies are important because it will help the researcher to understand what importance an organization puts on sexual harassment.

The final research question deals with the organization and its reaction to the discovery of a sexual harassment incident. This will be measured based on previous sexual harassment cases in which the organization became involved. The questions specifically will focus on managers and decisions the organization made when a sexual harassment action took place.

After administering the survey and examining the results the researcher hopes to expand the body of knowledge within the fundraising profession. From the results the researcher expects to see that sexual harassment is handled differently from organization to organization. This is because there is not a set policy in the fundraising world on how to handle a sexual harassment case involving a fundraiser and a donor. Although, the researcher does expect to find policies that companies follow to handle cases of sexual harassment, she does not expect to find strict policies, involving harsh repercussions, that one would find in a workplace setting between employees. There is a lack of knowledge about sexual harassment between fundraisers and donors within the scholarly literature and this study will help to fill that scholarly gap.

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