

Discrimination Has No Place at the Co-op

Maintaining a work—and shopping—environment free of harassment is paramount

By Melanie Bettenhausen, General Manager

I WAS RECENTLY CONTACTED by a concerned member of the Co-op who overheard a conversation about an employee that had received unwanted commentary related to their ethnicity. I was surprised to hear of this and immediately conducted an investigation. While my findings show that there was no direct harassment or discrimination in this particular instance, I learned that some of our employees regularly endure questions about their heritage or accent. The intention of most customers is to be friendly and conversational, but on occasion we have asked customers to leave because their words were hateful and hurtful.

As an employer, we are very clear about our workplace culture in our Employee Handbook: "It is the intent of the Co-op to provide a work environment free of verbal,

physical and visual forms of sexual or other harassment (race, religion, color, gender identity, genetic characteristic, national origin, creed, ancestry, age, physical, mental, or psychological disability, mental condition, gender, sex, pregnancy, childbirth or related conditions, marital, family, or military status, being a victim of domestic violence, stalking or sexual assault, sexual orientation nor any other status protected by federal, state, or local law, regulation, or ordinance). All employees are asked to be sensitive to the individual rights of their co-workers. In addition, it is an employee's right to be protected from harassment by persons providing services to the Co-op and Co-op members and customers.

This last bit is tricky. It is one thing to be able to hold employees accountable for the policies agreed to upon employment, it is

another to hold customers accountable for policies they did not agree to when entering our stores. It's even trickier to identify, hear about and resolve issues that affect our shoppers while in our stores. Nevertheless, it is our responsibility as an employer to ensure that our employees have a harassment-free work environment and this extends to the shopping experience as well. Whenever harassment or discrimination has come to our attention, we have addressed it immediately. The problem is that not everything comes to the attention of supervisors/managers. To ensure that we are truly creating a harassment-free workplace and shopping experience, I invite you all, our members, to help bring these issues to light. If you overhear, see or experience harassment or discrimination, we want to hear about it. You can talk to Customer Service, a Store Manager or call me directly at (707) 822-5947 ext. 220.

Living in Humboldt and working at the Co-op, and especially being Caucasian, discrimination is not something that regularly affects me personally; it is easy for me to be blind to the ways that it can play itself out in hurtful, harassing ways on a daily basis. However, as stated in our Employee Handbook, "a major part of our success is a result of many hard-working and dedicated employees. Without the teamwork, loyalty, and dedication of our employees, we could never have achieved the reputation we enjoy today. We are a cooperative, and that should be ever present in the workplace." The leadership team at the Co-op takes this very seriously and asks you to join us in helping to ensure we are doing our part to provide a friendly and welcoming environment for all.

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How to help foster a community free of discrimination and harassment

It can be difficult to know how to deal with discrimination and harassment, whether you're on the receiving end or an observer. Here are some simple ways to help create an inclusive, accepting community.

Talk about it

If you see, or experience, discrimination or harassment, don't keep quiet. Often these things are swept under the rug; exposing the situations can inspire others to stand up, and help you find resources, social support, and—hopefully—solutions.



Take a stand

If you are being harassed, the first step is to tell the harasser to stop. If you observe harassment, address the target directly. Simply asking if they are okay can make them feel supported while diffusing the situation. Ensure they know who to report the situation to, or assist them in doing so. No matter what, make sure the situation gets addressed.

Are you ok?

Do you need help?

Everything alright?

Practice inclusion & empathy

Celebrate common ground and differences, ensuring all are heard and invited. Identify what biases you may hold, and challenge yourself to put yourself in others' shoes, leaving room for histories that you may not know nor understand.

