Sexual Harassment Usually Starts With Inappropriate Comments

According to the Novations Group's annual workplace ridicule survey, sexually offensive remarks were heard more often in 2007 than in 2006. Specifically, 42% of the 546 male and female employees surveyed reported hearing sexually offensive comments in the workplace, up from 34% in 2006.

While a sexually inappropriate remark here or there won't generally rise to the level of a hostile environment, such comments are often a precursor to a viable sex harassment claim. Here are two examples.

1. A male employee tells a female co-worker he finds attractive what he'd like to do to her if they were alone. He never touches her, but his comments become more frequent and more graphic.

2. A female employee corners a male colleague and propositions him. Whenever possible thereafter, she brushes against him, gives him a hug, or massages his shoulders.

Too many supervisors dismiss isolated comments until it's too late — until those comments become anything but isolated or the aggressor acts on his/her words. That's why it's imperative that your supervisors immediately discipline employees for:

- making verbal advances or propositions of a sexual nature;
- making graphic verbal commentaries about an individual's body;
- making sexually derogatory comments, epithets, slurs, and jokes; and
- using sexually derogatory words to describe an individual.

Stress to them that they must take disciplinary action even if the complaining employee does not feel physically
threatened by the remarks; humiliation is an equal consideration, ruled the 11th Circuit. In the case before it, an executive allegedly "mortified" and "embarrassed" a female employee by failing to dispel rumors that they were a couple; telling people at a company event that she was not his date, but that he wished she were; and publicly offering her and her boyfriend $1 million if she would spend the night with him.