Will She Fit In?

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Source: Harvard Business Review; Mar/Apr97, Vol. 75 Issue 2, p18-32, 10p, 1 Color Photograph, 4 Black and White Photographs

Document Type:

Case Study

Subject Terms:

CASE studies
SEXUAL harassment of women -- Case studies
SEXUAL harassment -- Investigation
WOMEN employees
WOMEN -- Employment
PERSONNEL management
GENDER role in the work environment
WORK environment
SEXUAL harassment -- Law & legislation
WOMEN executives

NAICS/Industry Codes:

923130 Administration of Human Resource Programs (except Education, Public Health, and Veterans' Affairs Programs)
541612 Human Resources Consulting Services

Abstract:

Susan Carter, a partner at a prestigious strategy consulting firm, is caught in a dilemma she never expected: her firm's most important client has made an unwanted sexual advance toward her. As a friend of Susan's observes afterward, "The easy part was saying no. The hard part will be picking up the pieces." Susan is a savvy, successful professional who has spent the 12 years since business school climbing the corporate ladder. But this event throws her off balance, forcing her to confront some of the most subtle issues of power and inclusion at the highest levels of her organization. Her story takes us beyond the legal issue of sexual harassment to explore how gender can influence who is--and isn't--welcome at the top. Susan worries that reporting the incident will hurt her career, giving her a reputation as one of "those women"--the type that make men "uncomfortable." Throughout her career, she has seen women lose assignments because of that vague criticism. At the same time, she is deeply committed to making her organization an equitable place, where women are respected and valued members of the team. In essence, Susan desperately wants to find a way to break the unwritten rules and reform the unspoken attitudes that restrict many women's careers--without committing career suicide of her own. Can she do so and still fit in? Or is this one of those situations that are simply too hot to handle, for Susan and for her company? Three managers, a lawyer, and an expert on gender equity in the workplace offer Susan advice in this fictitious case study. [ABSTRACT FROM AUTHOR]
Will she fit in?

Susan's client made a pass at her. If she speaks out, will it destroy her career?

"And then, well, he just lunged at me."

"He did what?" Nancy asked incredulously.

"He lunged at me," Susan replied. "One minute we're sitting on the couch in his hotel room, rehearsing his board presentation, and the next minute he lurches toward me, knocking me over. I just couldn't believe it."

"Wow." There was silence on the phone line.

"Yeah, wow," Susan repeated. "Now what do I do?"

Susan Carter was a partner at the Crowne Group, a strategy consulting firm based in New York. Her good friend Nancy Richfield was an investment banker. In the 12 years since they had graduated from business school, the two women had kept in touch, often seeking advice and support from each other at difficult moments in their careers. Susan and Nancy were among a handful of women who had "joined the club" - attaining the rank of partner at elite, privately held firms in which 95% of the partners still were men. Crowne's New York office had the kind of partner mix typical of most consulting and investment-banking firms: there were 98 partners in all, 4 of them women.

Promotion to partner four years earlier was a goal Susan had worked hard to achieve. And her successes on the Pellmore account had given her a lot of visibility in the firm. In particular, her work with Brian Hanson, a group senior vice president at Pellmore Industries, was responsible for the dramatic turnaround of a troubled business. The turnaround had made Brian look like a hero, and he was so pleased that he had begun to champion Crowne to other executives at Pellmore. Almost overnight, Pellmore became Crowne's largest and most profitable client. Billings mushroomed to $28 million - more than 20% of the New York office's revenue. And Crowne's senior partners were hoping to expand the Pell - more budget even further during the annual account review the following month.

Susan could feel the tension in the back of her neck.

"So then what happened, after he lunged at you?" Nancy asked.

"I pushed him aside, jumped up off the couch, and said, 'This is not a good idea,'" Susan replied. "And - can you believe this? - I'm the one who picked up the slides, which by now were scattered all over the floor. Then I just got the hell out of there. I still can't believe Brian Hanson would pull a stunt like this. I've worked so hard. How am I going to get past this with him? Talk about the things they never teach you in business school!"
Susan's second line began to ring. She paused briefly, hoping her assistant would pick up. No luck. "Nancy, I've got to run now," she said. "Can we have lunch tomorrow? I really need some advice."

"Sure. I'll come by your office around noon."

Susan hit the button for her second line. "Susan Carter."

"Susan, it's Justin." The line was crackling with static. "I'm on a plane to Chicago, but I wanted an update on your meeting last night with Brian Hanson."

Just what I need right now, thought Susan. Justin Peale was the senior partner in charge of the Pellmore relationship. Tall, good-looking, and athletic, Justin was one of Crowne's leading rainmakers. The absolute confidence he projected to clients gave them the sense that no hill was too tough to take. But within Crowne, Justin had a different reputation. His colleagues respected him, however grudgingly, for his effectiveness in selling business. But those who worked for him directly could see that underneath all the bravado, Justin was basically insecure. In fact, none of the junior vice presidents liked working for him. He was good at taking credit for work others did and even better at distancing himself when things went badly.

"Oh, Justin, I'm pressed for time right now," Susan said, stalling. The last thing she wanted at the moment was to talk to Justin. "I'm off to Boston for a recruiting presentation. Then there's the reception and dinner. It'll be a late night."

"Well, when can we talk?" Justin persisted.

"Not until tomorrow afternoon."

"Okay. My office at 2?"

"Okay," Susan replied, relieved to have bought herself at least a day.

"Two o'clock, then!" Justin always had to have the last word.

Hanging up the phone, Susan stared out the window of her thirty-ninth-floor office at the Manhattan skyline. She knew that Justin hadn't been wildly enthusiastic about her being assigned to Pellmore two years earlier. At the time, Linda Bushnell, the administrative vice president responsible for client assignments, had pulled her aside. They had worked well together for years, and Linda wanted to give Susan a "heads up."

According to Linda, Justin was careful to tell her that he himself had "enormous respect" for Susan. "But we've got to do what's right for the client," he said. "They're a pretty tough bunch. I just don't know if the guys at Pellmore will be comfortable with her. Will she fit in? Susan doesn't feel like the right choice to me."

In the end, Justin was overruled by John McMullin, the managing director of Crowne's New York office. Susan had been a loyal trouper for Crowne, and John had promised her the next high-potential assignment to come along. He had kept his word.
John's okay, Susan thought now. And Crowne is a great firm. But the truth was that she and Nancy had heard some version of Justin's comments so many times during the years since business school that they had invented a name for it: the Comfort Syndrome. The two friends knew dozens of talented women-in their own firms and in client organizations- who had been passed over for the same reason Justin had tried to use to keep Susan off the Pellmore account: "We're just not comfortable with her." Or "We're not sure it's a good fit."

And it wasn't the first time Susan had encountered the syndrome herself, either. When she first joined Crowne, for instance, there had been some question about whether a client in the steel industry would be "comfortable" with her. The guys at the client were "very rough," the argument went. Would she be able to "bond" with them? Despite this concern, Susan was given the job, and the client ended up being tremendously impressed with the results of the project.

Why is it, Susan wondered, that we're never uncomfortable with him? Not once in her four years on Crowne's promotion committee had she heard that phrase. Comfort was obviously some kind of code, but what exactly did it mean when people said they were "uncomfortable with her"? She's too aggressive? She's not one of us? Or what?

Susan was convinced that most men were totally unconscious of the Comfort Syndrome. Just the previous month, for example, one of her male colleagues, someone she liked a lot, called her for a reference on a woman she had once worked with. "A client of mine is considering her for a senior position. What do you think of her?" he had asked. Susan began to describe the woman's considerable accomplishments, but her colleague stopped her short.

"No," he said. "That's not it. They're nervous about whether they'll like working with her." He paused. "You know," he said, "it rhymes with witch."

Susan had been stunned, but she was careful not to show it. If I try to explain to him why that's offensive, she thought, I'll become one of those women he's uncomfortable with. Susan was reminded of something her father once said. He had been a fighter pilot and a great supporter of Susan and her sister. "To be successful," he advised, "many women in your generation will have to learn to fly underneath the radar-to go undetected-in order to get along." This advice had always bothered Susan: she wanted to believe she could succeed by being herself. But the older she got, the more she came to understand what her father meant.

Returning her thoughts to the incident with Brian, Susan began to play out various scenarios in her mind. Should I try, she wondered, to smooth things over with Brian? I could use Justin's help in thinking this through, but that means I'll have to tell him what happened. And if I do, he'll panic. He might have me taken off the client's account: he'd do anything to avoid putting Pellmore revenue at risk, and he knows Brian is the key contact there right now. If Brian is upset with us, forget about a budget increase. And if I'm "moved" to another client, I can kiss my bonus good-bye - and not just this year's. I've killed myself for the last two years earning credibility at Pellmore. I'm finally at the point where it's starting to pay off.

I know what Justin will think, Susan said to herself: This wouldn't have happened if we'd put Don Finley in instead of Susan. But maybe I'm just being paranoid. Didn't Justin tell me only last week that I deserve a lot of the credit for growing the Pellmore relationship? And hasn't he been kidding me for the last month about the beach house he thinks I should buy with this year's bonus? He couldn't possibly blame me for what happened!
Susan's door opened. It was her assistant. "You'd better get going or you'll miss your flight," she said.

On the shuttle back to New York that night, Susan couldn't stop thinking about the irony of the previous 24 hours: My client makes a pass at me. I don't trust my boss-or the firm- with the truth. And then I spend an evening with a group of eager M.B.A. students telling them what a great place the Crowne Group is for women. What's wrong with this picture?

Susan's presentation at the business school had drawn a packed house. And there were a couple of really impressive candidates at dinner. This was a part of the job that Susan loved: working with talented young people. Crowne measured its recruiting success by the number of bids it won against archrival Spectra Consulting. And in the previous several years, Crowne had been gaining ground, especially among the strongest female candidates. Susan knew she had a lot to do with that success. Whenever there was a woman Crowne didn't want to lose, Susan was trotted out to win her over.

The sad thing, thought Susan wearily, is that Crowne is, in fact, one of the better firms for women. She closed her eyes. It had been a long day.

Susan and Nancy always ate at Café Soleil when they needed a quiet place to talk. After the waitress brought their salads, they picked up their conversation where they had left off the day before.

"Did you see it coming?" Nancy asked. "Had Brian been sort of coming on to you for a while?"

"No-not at all," Susan answered quickly. "I mean, I've been working closely with the guy for almost two years. We've had at least half a dozen meetings like this one in his hotel room to review work. I thought we had great rapport. Part of my job is to get clients to like me, to build relationships. But there was never anything flirtatious on either his part or mine."

"So you had no clue what he was up to?" Nancy asked.

"No," Susan said firmly, but then she paused. "There was one funny thing, though," she suddenly recalled. "I really didn't think anything of it at the time. But maybe-"

"What?" Nancy prompted her.

"It happened that night, before Brian and I went back to his room. We were at dinner with a bunch of people from Pellmore, and Brian's planning guy pulled me aside right afterward. He said he was really sorry that he wouldn't be able to sit in on the meeting later in Brian's room. What was odd was what he said next. He asked me, 'Are you okay with that?' I remember being thrown off balance slightly by his question. I mean, I knew the details of the presentation much better than he did, so it struck me as an odd thing to say since there didn't seem to be much reason for him to be there in the first place." Susan looked at Nancy, perplexed.

"Do you suppose the planning guy knew something I didn't know about Brian?" she asked. "Do you think he's got some kind of reputation?"

Nancy shrugged. The comment left her wondering, too.
Susan pushed her plate aside. "It's not as though I haven't been in meetings with clients in their hotel rooms- it happens all the time in this business," she went on. "You're always on the/road, you work crazy hours, and a lot of business gets done over dinner and sometimes late into the night."

"Yeah, but try telling that to Justin," Nancy broke in, "and he'll want to know what you were wearing. And, worse, maybe he'll start to think your success at Pellmore has been based on-"

"Don't even say it," Susan interrupted her friend.

"Okay, but don't be naïve, Susan. You tell Justin, and whether or not he pulls you off Pellmore, you can bet that this will come up every time they evaluate you or think about you for a new assignment. It may never be raised explicitly, but it will always be there at some level."

"I think you're right," said Susan. "The old Comfort Syndrome rears its ugly head. And this time, it's about me."

Susan's thoughts jumped to the upcoming account review. "On the other hand," she continued, "if I don't tell Justin what happened and our budget gets trashed because Brian's mad at me, I'll be blamed." Susan stopped. She was getting ahead of herself.

"You know what?" she said after a moment. "Isn't there a bigger issue here? We both know that most of the men we work with wouldn't do what Brian did. They would think it was wrong. And from everything I know about Pellmore's CEO, this is absolutely not the kind of behavior he'd tolerate. It goes beyond the fear of lawsuits: he's a decent guy, he has two daughters in college, and he wants to make a difference."

"Finished?" asked the waitress as she began clearing the dishes. Susan and Nancy both signaled that they were done.

"But maybe," Nancy suggested, "Pellmore ought to be more concerned about lawsuits. I'll bet you a million dollars that this isn't the first time Brian has tried something like this. Maybe the CEO really needs to put a stop to this guy."

"Maybe," said Susan. "How can he-how can anyone-be an effective leader when we all maintain this conspiracy of silence? When we pretend everything is fine? Maybe the same goes for Crowne. Maybe John McMullin ought to know, too."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, most of the guys on our executive committee - except Justin - are okay. They just don't always see the connections. I'm not trying to be a saint here, and I can't picture myself ever saying anything about this to John, but I wish there were some way to manage this so that something positive could come out of it."

"Or maybe it's simply too hot to handle," Nancy said. "You're right. Most guys are not like Brian. But a lot of them would say, What's the big deal? Get over it. They don't understand that the easy part is saying no. The hard part is picking up the pieces afterward."
Susan looked at her watch. "It's 1:45," she said. "I'd better run. It's time for my meeting with Justin, and you know how he hates to be kept waiting."

**Should Susan Report the Incident or Pretend It Never Happened?**

Five commentators offer advice on how to handle sexual harassment at work.

On one level, Susan Carter's dilemma is straightforward. We all have problems with clients or customers at one time or another. When that happens, there is an obvious and normal response: you assemble the client team and you figure out an action plan to resolve the problem.

Suppose, for example, that the Crowne consultants had done some analysis for Pellmore and that the numbers did not make Brian Hanson look good. Brian might ask the consultants to position the data in as positive a light as possible during their meeting with Pellmore's leaders. That probably wouldn't be a big problem for Crowne. The partner in charge could easily respond with integrity, "We'll position the numbers as positively as possible under the circumstances."

But suppose Brian asked the consultants to change the numbers in a materially misleading way. That would be a major problem. And it's the kind of problem the partner in charge would be unwise to handle on her own. Better to take it to her colleagues. In such a case, would Susan be held responsible for the client's behavior? If the firm's leaders have any traditional core values to speak of, I doubt it. More likely, Crowne's leadership team would stand behind Susan and refuse to yield to the client's unethical request.

Following this logic, then, Susan should take the Brian Hanson case to her partners. It's a business problem. Treat it, like any other. As for Brian himself, Susan has at least two choices on how to deal with him. One is to press forward as if nothing happened (the What's the big deal? approach) and see if he takes the escape route quietly. After all, he, too, has something to lose by having the incident exposed. Or she could talk to him and try to salvage the situation gracefully: "I must say, you took me by surprise the other night. I'm happy to put this behind us if you are."

But, having made the case for treating the Brian Hanson incident like a straightforward business problem, one has to acknowledge that Susan's situation strikes a deeper, far more troubling chord. Clearly, it doesn't feel like a normal business problem to either Susan or her close friend Nancy Richfield. Both women have achieved all the visible manifestations of success. Susan is a partner at Crowne - an elected member of the firm's leadership. Many regard her as a role model, especially the younger female associates. But, as many women in Susan's position discover, success feels qualified - conditional.

Susan's ambivalence reminds me of a survey of senior-level business managers that I heard about recently. The male respondents generally reported that they felt "accepted" as leaders in their organizations. The women, on the other hand, reported that they felt merely "tolerated." Imagine what it must feel like for these women to step out on a limb - to challenge the status quo or to call attention to themselves in any way. Think about it. An individual who is merely tolerated is not in an empowered position that supports her taking a leadership role.

Susan's real dilemma is that, whether she likes it or not, she must confront some fundamental issues about herself and the firm at which she has made her career. She has been asked by a client to do something totally unacceptable, and, as a result, she believes that an important piece
of the business may be at risk. She obviously is afraid that she cannot count on her "partners." This is a moment of truth. If Susan is going to act as an accepted member of the team, she must bring the Brian Hanson incident to her firm's leadership.

But how? Susan correctly perceives that the Pellmore revenue is at risk and that her ability to manage the account may be compromised. It is unlikely, however, that Susan would be a partner at Crowne today had she not developed good relationships with some of her partners. Now is the time for her to use some of the equity she has built up over the years. She might approach John McMullin, for example, or another member of Crowne's executive committee who has supported her. Her objective should be a mature and sensible conversation about how to resolve the problem without compromising the Pellmore business.

But here's the bottom line: If Crowne treats Susan badly and blames her for what happened in the hotel room that night, then she has learned something important about the firm. On the other hand, if she already knows that the partnership will respond badly, then she also already knows that she is working only for the money. Although many women and minorities I have known find this bargain acceptable for a while, over time the price they must pay for living in "bad faith" becomes too high. They leave corporate America. Many join or launch small, usually entrepreneurial ventures in which biases and double standards, if they exist, can more easily be exposed and banished.

But they shouldn't have to leave. That's corporate America's great opportunity today: to create an honest environment in which diversity - defined in its broadest sense as diversity of thought and experience, as well as of race, gender, age, and so forth- is respected and valued. In such an environment, Susan's encounter with Brian would be a straightforward business problem. She would have nothing to fear in taking it public. This is the kind of culture that Susan's firm and others like it must cultivate if they want to retain the competitive advantage that diversity in the workforce can bring. For, in the final analysis, Susan's story is one about leadership, authenticity, and integrity-not only hers but also her organization's.

Gillian Derbyshire

Susan is between a rock and a hard place. She has succeeded in her career by doing all the right things and playing by the rules. She has understood the importance of not making men "uncomfortable" with her. But I think she's reached a point where all bets are off.

For once, making the men she works for uncomfortable is what she must do. Susan must tell Crowne's leaders about the Brian Hanson incident. If she doesn't, the underlying problem of the Comfort Syndrome will never get fixed. The question is, Will Susan be true to herself or is she such a slave to her paycheck that she won't risk the immediate consequences of speaking the truth?

Admittedly, the very fact that Susan has been placed in this position is an injustice. Why should she be the one to have to risk anything? But doing nothing is worse. If Susan allows this incident to pass without seeking redress, she'll never again be able to look a recruit in the eye. More important, she may have trouble looking herself in the eye. This challenge is not about the best way to play office politics. It's about who Susan is as a human being-it's about integrity.
Tactics do matter, however. Susan's boss on the Pellmore account, Justin Peale, has only one objective, keeping the revenues from the account flowing. He is a major impediment to getting the issue resolved. If Susan went to Justin, he'd probably cluck sympathetically and tell her what she wanted to hear. Then he'd do nothing. Or, just as bad, he might contact Crowne's managing director, John McMullin, and tell him the story. But it most likely would be filtered and full of innuendo.

Susan needs to be sure that the communication about what happened is absolutely clear. She should call a meeting with both Justin and John. The two men need to hear the same story, at the same time, directly from Susan. You can bet that Justin will squirm in his seat when this conversation takes place. And John won't like it much, either. But Susan's strategy will force them to take action.

Susan probably will have to ask to have herself removed from the client. That's another injustice, but it may be the only way she can continue to be effective at Crowne. What about Pellmore and its CEO? Susan is correct to ask how any leader can do the right thing if he doesn't know what's going on in his organization. Although her question is a good one, she shouldn't be the one to cross the line over to the client's camp. The repercussions would be too complex and too difficult to manage. John McMullin, however, seems like the right person to have a constructive conversation with Pellmore's CEO.

Susan should realize that she has more to offer her firm than it has to offer her. She's good at her job, and others have clearly recognized that. She has a real card to play—and this is the time to play it. Susan must be willing to walk away from Crowne, to work for a competing firm if necessary. She has to be determined, not hesitant. And she must be assertive. No one ever broke through the glass ceiling while cowering.

This commentary was submitted under the condition of anonymity by the female vice president of human resources at a consumer products company.

My advice to Susan is, Don't get mad, get even. Does this mean she should file a lawsuit or try to get Brian fired? On the contrary. It means she should do nothing and live to fight another day.

Luckily, Susan is savvy enough to understand the complexities of the mess she's in. Brian Hanson has a problem: he's obviously not in control of his impulses. But, as people, in Susan's position always discover, if she's not careful, his problem will quickly turn into her problem. In fact, it already has. The reason: Brian is the client—a male client. It's a client's world and a man's world. In other words, there is nothing Susan can do right now that will leave her better off than she was before Brian lunged at her. It's frustrating. It's not fair. But it's reality.

In reality, corporate America is filled with managers who resent and fear women and minorities, believing they are just lying in wait, ready to sue companies at the drop of a hat for harassment or discrimination. Susan's story is probably a lot more representative: a woman who is shocked and confused by what has happened to her. More important, she doesn't once mention the possibility of calling a lawyer. Susan seems to know business protocol well enough to know better. Legal action would get her little but a permanent unemployment check.

Still, Susan is understandably concerned about the larger social issues her problem raises. She has experienced firsthand the Comfort Syndrome—as she and her friend Nancy Richfield have
dubbed it—which makes it hard for many women to succeed in their careers, especially when they near the top of the organization. So what should she do?

From what I've seen in my 20-year career, Susan will almost certainly get burned if she tries to take the matter public. Nancy is right to call such a strategy naïve. Yes, it would be good if everyone were aware of the attitudes that block women from moving up. But the Brian Hanson incident is the wrong vehicle; as Nancy rightly observes, it's too hot to handle. The potential legal liability around sexual harassment—and the fact that such cases always provoke deeply emotional reactions in an organization—would distract people from the core issue Susan wants to expose. Her boss, her firm, her client—all would feel that a gun was pointed at their heads. Under that kind of pressure, learning wouldn't take place.

In the final analysis, then, Susan has no choice but to back off. She should use the intelligence and intuition that have gotten her this far to know when the time is right to get people thinking about what they mean when they ask, Will she fit in? If this experience has truly awakened her to the realities of gender bias, then she should take that lesson to heart and keep up the good fight.

Ultimately, the kind of social change Susan is looking for will happen only when women make up a substantial proportion of the partnership—and of the ranks of senior executives in client organizations. That's the end she should work toward in order to avenge Brian's inappropriate advance. She should continue to lead her firm in hiring and retaining the kind of women who can help turn the tide. And while she's doing that, she need not feel as though she's compromising her integrity by overselling the firm to female recruits. There is nothing wrong with telling them, "The Crowne Group is a great place in most respects, but it would be a better place with you here." It's the truth. Susan should appeal to the kind of recruits who will turn Crowne into a place where the Comfort Syndrome is a remnant of a distant past.

Anthony P. D'Andrea

There can be zero tolerance in today's business environment for the type of conduct exhibited by Brian. It is not only boorish and crude but unlawful: "unpermitted touching" is considered assault and battery under most state laws.

Susan may choose to deal with Brian herself—by talking with him about the incident or by ignoring it. Either approach would likely prove ineffective. The first one could set in motion a chain of events that makes it appear as if she, rather than Brian, is the problem. For instance, having been confronted by Susan privately, Brian then might bring his version of events forward as a preemptive strike, forcing Susan to endure a public "trial" based on rumor and innuendo. No one wins in the ensuing mess: not Susan, not Crowne, not other women who have to deal with the Brian Hansons of the world. By ignoring the situation, on the other hand, Susan may be encouraging Brian to try again—a result she surely doesn't intend.

Another option: Susan could take her case to the local police and file criminal assault-and-battery charges against Brian. This strategy also is unlikely to achieve a satisfactory resolution. Susan soon might become burdened with large legal fees to defend her allegations, as well as with a new reputation as an extremist or troublemaker.
What Susan should do is formally document and report the incident to authorities within both Crowne and Pellmore. From my experience, this strategy is the one that ultimately will work in her best interest.

Most companies the size of Crowne have sexual harassment policies in effect. Susan should review Crowne's policy to see whether it addresses sexual harassment of employees by clients. She also should check whether its protection extends to partners. From a legal and ethical point of view, it should; but there are some firms in which partners, as owners, receive only limited protection.

Very soon after Susan reviews the policy, she should let the chairman of Crowne's executive committee know about the incident. To delay is to risk giving Brian the opportunity to claim that Susan has "conjured the situation up" because, for example, of anticipated changes in Pellmore's business relationship with Crowne. The memo that Susan gives the chairman should describe the incident and list any witnesses to it, which in this case would include Brian's "planning guy" and Susan's friend Nancy. In her meeting with the chairman, Susan should request that he lodge a formal complaint with his counterpart at Pellmore.

When he lodges the complaint, the chairman of Crowne's executive committee should emphasize that the working relationship between Crowne and Pellmore is an important one and that Crowne wants it to continue. However, he must be clear that Crowne expects a response to the complaint. Brian should be sanctioned in some appropriate way. Interestingly, Pellmore might actually welcome the information about Brian because it could very well be in the process of building a case against him for other transgressions of this nature. Or the company may value the information simply so it can avoid putting Brian in situations where he might be able to make other unwanted approaches.

After Susan's meeting with Crowne's chairman, it may be politically wise for her to discuss the incident immediately with Justin. She should try to make an ally of him, although that may not be possible. Justin's predictable irritation with Susan may eventually be mitigated if it turns out— as it often does in such cases—that Brian has behaved similarly with other women both inside and outside his own company.

The easiest solution for Susan, of course, would be to pretend that the incident with Brian never happened. Reporting the problem will undoubtedly lead to some awkwardness, some uncomfortable meetings, and perhaps even some confrontations. But the easiest solution in this case is not the best. The law clearly upholds a woman's right to be protected from unwanted sexual attention and touching, and it requires companies to adopt policies and procedures to discourage and punish such behavior.

Susan has an obligation— to herself and to others—to use the protections that were enacted on her behalf. Pellmore has an obligation to deal appropriately with Brian. And Crowne— including Justin — has an obligation to do what is right by placing the protection of one of its members ahead of any particular piece of business, no matter how profitable.

J. William Codinha

Susan is in a no-win situation. If she speaks out, she's sure to damage her career. If she stays silent, she damages her sense of personal integrity, not to mention the cause of the millions of
working women who do daily battle with subtle and overt forms of sexual harassment. But it's hard to ask a blameless person to be a martyr. Susan shouldn't have to pay the price for Brian's behavior, although she will no matter what course of action she takes. In fact, the only upside of this sad case is what it teaches us about the Crowne Group: that it is an excellent example of how not to manage gender issues.

The fact that Susan feels trapped in her dilemma and solicits counsel from a friend outside her firm suggests that Crowne, like many other professional-services firms, has paid little attention to gender issues that may arise when employees conduct business with clients. Our surveys of such firms show that approximately one-third of female partners report that they were subjected to unwanted sexual attention during the preceding year. The initiators of that behavior are almost evenly divided among male clients, male peers, and more senior male partners. The only way in which Susan's experience is unusual is that her harasser did not begin with verbal harassment before escalating his "pass" to a physical assault.

Professional-services firms that provide little assistance to women who have been subjected to unwelcome sexual attention usually share other characteristics as well. For instance, Crowne's human resources function probably handles support staff only; a partners' committee probably handles other personnel issues, mostly limited to recruiting, compensation, and election to partner. The firm undoubtedly has a policy on sexual harassment; most likely it is brief, it was designed for minimal compliance with the law, and it does not mention special circumstances, such as harassment initiated by clients or other third parties. The policy almost surely provides for only a formal grievance and investigation procedure, over which Susan would have no control once it was set in motion. The firm's leaders would decide whether she should remain with the client and whether she should ever again be assigned to a significant client. They would, in other words, set the limits of her career:

It's not surprising, then, that research indicates that firms like Crowne hear about only 5% to 10% of the situations in which partners or employees feel subjected to unwanted sexual attention. The other 95% share Susan's bind: ignore the incident or maneuver around it and hope it doesn't blow up.

Crowne is probably typical of professional-services firms in other ways as well. A few powerful senior partners have a habit of drinking too much at in-house functions and behaving inappropriately, especially with summer associates. Some senior partners have a reputation for habitually dating women junior to them. A handful are on their second or third marriages to substantially younger women whom they met in the firm. Most of these women have subsequently quit to stay home with young children. Team meetings and hallway chats are occasionally punctuated by partners' descriptions of female clients in canine terms (such as dog or bitch) or by comments about the appeal of their specific body parts. The few instances of sexual harassment that female employees complain about are handled with an eye to the relative value of the accused and the accuser to the firm; a few men have been warned, and several women have left with a check and a gag order.

Crowne's very small number of female partners are probably not, as a group, highly supportive of other women. If they are representative of female partners in other professional-services firms, probably only half are married (compared with more than 90% of the men). Some believe they have had to make tough choices in life and have little tolerance for the "whining" of younger women. Others, of course, see systematic bias against women - and people of color, lesbians, and
gays - in how the firm recruits, staffs, evaluates, develops, and promotes people, as well as in clients' attitudes.

Susan's dilemma results not from one sociopathic client but from a web of subtle forces. There is no evil conspiracy at Crowne; most of the firm's partners are simply oblivious to the problem. The firm's success relies on rewarding a very narrow set of skills and values: it expects employees to show analytical and quantitative rigor, to be devoted to serving clients, and to define their own effectiveness solely in terms of their contribution to the clients' and the firm's bottom lines. The firm doesn't quantify the casualties or the costs to its people- the egregious treatment they might experience or the diminished quality of their individual and family lives. When employees leave, they are seen as people who didn't fit in or who weren't of sufficient caliber to succeed.

If Crowne is managing gender differences inadequately, what's better? How can any company create a more enlightened environment for its employees?

First, it should have in place a customized policy for handling situations such as the one Susan is in - one that fits the circumstances of its particular business. It should have informal as well as formal channels for solving problems and complaints. It should offer sensitivity training appropriate to the firm's different constituencies. It should have monitoring and sensing mechanisms, which might include examinations of patterns of inclusion and exclusion in client-firm team meetings, systematic and anonymous surveys of employees on their experiences and perceptions relating to harassment and discrimination, and evaluations of partners - during formal performance reviews- on their sensitivity to these issues. Finally, the firm's senior partners, should make an unequivocal commitment to apply the policy consistently-to make no exceptions, not even for rainmakers.

However, experience suggests that it takes a crisis to force a firm to act on issues of bias, harassment, and discrimination. Susan could choose to force that crisis. That's a personal decision. If she does decide to do so, she also should start putting together her résumé. And as she begins her next job search, she should screen prospective employers to determine not only the proportion of women who are partners but also the firms' real philosophies, policies, and practices.

Ironically, if Susan is edged out of Crowne, the firm may ultimately benefit from the "unpleasantness" she started. It will be forced to learn how to deal with gender issues fairly and effectively. In the years to come, good women like Susan won't have to leave. Good women will join the firm, and the bottom line will be the stronger for it. Too bad Susan won't be around to reap the rewards.

Freada Klein