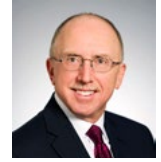




*Rabab
Meen*



*Patrick
Nelson*



*Armand
Conant*

Protecting Property Managers: Safeguarding Against Workplace Harassment

Yelling and screaming. Being called stupid, lazy, or even worse. Threats to report you to the board of directors, your regional manager, to the CMRAO, all to get you fired. Threats of physical violence and even death. The phone is ringing off the hook. You are getting fifty emails a day about the same thing.

This is harassment. Every experienced manager has dealt with it in some form at some point in their career. Anecdotally, the problem has gotten worse since the pandemic, with our office now fielding a seemingly endless series of concerns from property managers facing abuse and intimidation.

It is trite to say that property managers are people, entitled to the simple dignity of being able to go to work without fear of harassment. Yet, they often encounter various forms of harassment, both from the owners they serve and the directors they answer to, causing some to leave the industry and others to consider leaving. In addition, horror stories about the

relentless pressure and lack of support can dissuade potential candidates from joining the profession. As a result, the number of qualified property managers is dwindling, and the problem is only expected to worsen.

The Challenge

Property managers are delegated the task of handling the day-to-day operations of a condominium, which means that they are often the person who carries out the corporation's statutory obligations, the person who enforces the declaration, by-laws, and rules, and the person who gives effect to the board's decisions and policies. They are the face of the corporation and the first person to contact. When a resident is upset about mandatory fire testing, they yell at the property manager. When an owner gets a notice that their tenant is smoking, they accuse the property manager of lying. When the board is forced to increase

common element fees because of inflation, or impose a special assessment for a major project, the property manager is accused of stealing and self-dealing.

At the same time, some directors subject their property managers to unreasonable expectations and standards and even bully and berate them. Property managers can find their inbox flooded with emails demanding instant responses, even late into the night and early in the morning. They may have multiple properties and limited hours to devote to each one, yet there is an unrelenting expectation of immediate availability.

What exacerbates the situation is often a micromanaging and a hypercritical approach to the manager's work. An abusive director or owner is only too eager to pounce on a property manager for their perceived mistakes, even where the error is non-existent or trivial, or the issue is totally outside the manager's expertise or control.

Condominium Corporations Must Protect their Property Managers

The reality is that workplace harassment is the inevitable result of prevailing attitudes that tolerate, accept, or even elevate, the misuse of power to mistreat others. Unabated, it creates a toxic, unsafe environment for property managers and other workers.

Condominium corporations are obligated by law to protect their workers, including property managers, from workplace harassment – this includes vexatious, bothersome, abusive comments or behaviour that is or ought to be reasonably known to be unwelcome. What was said or done is less important than how it was received. Corporations must take steps to stop workplace harassment and prevent it from happening.

Practical Solutions for Creating Safer Work Environments

Corporations should have a clear and accessible workplace harassment policy. The best practice is to incorporate the policy into the rules of the corporation.

In addition, boards must be mindful of the potential for harassment and ensure that the directors themselves do not contribute to it. Boards may consider implementing communication policies and expectations (e.g., response times for after-hours emails), as well as taking education and training sessions. Topics for seminars should include recognizing signs of harassment, reporting incidents, and supporting employees who have experienced it. ACMO and the Canadian Condominium Institute (Toronto) are excellent resources for educational seminars.

Another practical solution is establishing transparent communication channels

for addressing grievances and complaints. Managers should feel comfortable reporting harassment, and the process for addressing these issues should be clearly outlined. Clear communication channels allow property managers to effectively voice their concerns and feel supported in addressing any issues. For example, if the harassment is by an owner, the communications should be made to a designated director. If the harassment is by a board member, the process becomes more complicated; the corporation, in consultation with the management service provider, must determine the reporting procedure.

Furthermore, access to counselling or support groups can be beneficial and should be available, as these resources provide property managers with a safe space to discuss their experiences and receive support. If the situation is severe enough, the manager should immediately leave the site and protect themselves.

If the circumstances warrant, corporations may consider installing cameras, with audio, in and about the management office. Appropriate signage and notices should be posted. Clear and fair policies must be made about who can view the video; the manager is not protected if the cameras become another way for an abusive director to monitor and micromanage the manager.

Finally, and most importantly, it is essential that abusive individuals be held accountable for their actions. The first step should always be a clear warning in writing. Many property managers are already well-versed in reducing tempers by firmly reminding the person that they are out of line. If a warning does not work, then the board should consider instruct-

ing corporation legal counsel to send an appropriate cease-and-desist letter and/or to commence appropriate legal proceedings. It must be clear to both the person responsible and the manager that harassment will not be tolerated.

Boards and owners should create a safer and more respectful work environment by implementing these and other solutions. Harassment and unsafe working conditions are issues that must be addressed directly, and in doing so we can improve working environment for managers and provide them respect they deserve. If not, the industry cannot hope to recruit or retain management talent. ■

Rabab Meen is an associate at Shibley Righton LLP in the Condominium and Business Law Group. Rabab primarily assists condominium corporations with essential corporate documents, contract negotiation, and provides advice on operational and compliance matters.

Patrick Nelson is an associate lawyer in the condominium group at Shibley Righton LLP. Patrick provides expert advice on compliance matters and helps clients navigate their statutory and regulatory obligations.

Armand Conant heads up the condo law group of Shibley Righton LLP and represents corporations of all types across Ontario. Armand is a Past President of CCI (Toronto) and Past chair of its Legislative Committee, on which he remains. Armand is a recipient of ACMO's Special Recognition Award, President's Award and Associate Member of the Year award, and CCI(Toronto)'s Distinguished Service Award shibleyrighton.com



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