



Preventing discrimination in the workplace

The Free Dictionary defines discrimination as: 1. *The act of discriminating.* 2. *The ability or power to see or make fine distinctions; discernment.* The dictionary offers a third definition as well, one that is relevant to each person's workplace: 3. *Treatment or consideration based on class or category rather than individual merit; partiality or prejudice.*

Employment discrimination occurs when employers illegally single out employees or job applicants on the basis of certain characteristics. To be the "illegal" form of employment discrimination, employers must adversely single out employee(s) on the basis of [age](#), [disability](#), [national origin](#), [race/color](#), [religion](#), [retaliation](#), [military duty](#), [genetics](#), [pregnancy](#), gender ([sex](#)) or [equal pay and compensation](#) in violation of [federal employment discrimination laws](#) or other laws that have anti-discrimination provisions.^[1]

And just in case you think this doesn't happen or happens infrequently, consider the following. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission reported 99,947 employment discrimination charges in the fiscal year ending 9/30/2011 – the highest number on record.

Here are a few things you can do to create a climate in your workplace where discrimination or the perception of discrimination cannot flourish.

- Model good behavior. Be courteous to all of your colleagues. Set an example.
- Develop a written anti-discrimination policy. Talk with others about your organization's intolerance for discrimination.
- If someone comes to talk with you about something they think is harassing or discriminatory that has happened in the workplace, listen carefully, investigate promptly and act appropriately.
- Don't retaliate against someone for bringing forward what they sincerely feel is a problem.
- Provide training on what constitutes illegal discrimination and how to avoid it. Be certain that training includes information on preventing harassment.
- Audit your employment decisions (hires, promotions, disciplinary actions, salary increases/decreases, etc.) regularly to be sure you are not having a negative impact on a specific group of people.
- Confront the person responsible if you see harassing or discriminatory behavior.

- o Celebrate diversity.

Finally, if – in spite of your best efforts – you do draw a charge of discrimination, work with a skilled and knowledgeable attorney who specializes in employment law. An expert will help you and your organization respond appropriately.

[1] Be aware that congregations and religious organizations may be in a unique position to have religious requirements for certain positions that are not illegal. This is a complex topic that is not covered here.

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