

Fostering R-E-S-P-E-C-T in the Environmental Workplace

Michelle Heffernan, Trace Associates Inc.

Through our journey in diversity, equity, and inclusion, and our commitment to reconciliation, Trace Associates Inc. (Trace) has been working on encouraging conversation about situations in the workplace that can make people feel uncomfortable. We wanted to go beyond the typical conversations about anti-harassment, anti-violence, and anti-bully policies and instead stimulate real conversations about real situations that are faced in our industry and then identify potential mitigations or tools to help handle them. We have noted that the typical definitions of harassment or violence are not always inclusive...as those experiences can be different for everyone, and feelings should not be overlooked or labeled invalid because they do not fit into a definition or box. The focus should be on the individual. Employees should feel comfortable and safe in the workplace. No one should be made to feel uncomfortable, and if they do that is motivation for change.

One of the findings was that often the discomfort was not talked about. People felt uneasy discussing uncomfortable topics and, in some situations, people had a complacency about difficult situations that are commonplace. As a female supervising crews in the field, I have been made to feel extremely uncomfortable and felt alone in that. So how do you plan for and train for situations that are not talked about and how do you make change if you do not know change is needed? This instigated a desire to start the conversation, encourage discussion, and provide tools for those situations that we often avoid. Unmasking the real-life examples of situations in the field or interactions on the job where unwanted comments or actions based on gender, age, race, religion, etc. occur allows for development of tools to support appropriate responses and reactions in those situations. Those tools to be discussed include:

- Preventative measures to be implemented to hopefully establish expectations for respect and boundaries
- Physical reminders on paper and on hard hats that respect is the expectation

- Preventative measures to be implemented by managers to support training and resources
- Conversational tools to be used in the moment to respectfully identify and quickly cease the unwanted behaviour Response tools for managers and colleagues to support someone to retreat safely from a difficult situation
- Follow-up tools to support staff and managers after a situation has occurred
- Motivation for continuing the conversation, establishing a safe space to share, and hopefully provide learnings for others

The Maya Angelou quote “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better,” resonates when it comes to respect in the workplace. If we cannot talk openly and honestly about what respect means to us and what behaviour is disrespectful, then how can we possibly know better or do better? How as an industry can we do better, leave a legacy for those who follow, and provide the appropriate tools for when things get tough, if we are not willing to talk about what makes us uncomfortable?

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Ms. Heffernan is a Partner and a Special Projects Manager with Trace Associates Inc. and has over 15 years of experience in conducting environmental site assessments, remediation, reclamation, post-construction monitoring, and groundwater monitoring related to oil and gas, industrial, and land development activities. At Trace, Michelle specializes in management of large scale, complex assessment and remediation projects, pipeline post-construction reclamation monitoring, and is involved in the strategic planning of the firm (including participating on the Respect in The Workplace Committee and the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Team). Michelle is currently supporting TC Energy in a part time secondment role