

Take a proactive approach to discrimination prevention

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Because of widespread national publicity given the recent class-action lawsuits against Texaco and Avis for racial discrimination, it's time for the U.S. golf course maintenance industry to re-examine the diversity programs at golf facilities to determine whether they have been successful in creating a tolerant workplace.

In the past few years, discrimination has become one of the most serious and challenging employment issues. Because people of similar race, religion, nationality or ethnic groups tend to gather among their respective selves for religious, social and leisure activities, the workplace is one of the few places where everyone comes together.

Thus, if the workplace atmosphere isn't a tolerant one, not only will an operation's goals and bottom line become adversely affected, but the smoldering and unresolved issues also could lead to harassment or discrimination lawsuits. These types of lawsuits are expensive, time-consuming and generate considerable negative publicity.

The Civil Rights Act of 1991 didn't create any new substantive rights beyond those previously granted under the 1964 law. But the '91 act did alter the law by making it easier for employees to prove employment discrimination. New remedies were established, entitling victims to a jury trial as well as compensatory and punitive damages. More lawsuits have resulted from these changes.

Any review of a golf facility's employment policy should begin with making sure the policy is in writing and that it prohibits all forms of discrimination based on race, national origin, sex and

disability. A comprehensive diversity policy must prohibit discrimination in hiring, promotions and terminations. To be effective, the policy must be communicated to all employees so they will learn to appreciate diversity, not fear it, and understand that inappropriate behavior can create a hostile work environment.

For example, discriminatory jokes of any kind shouldn't be permitted, even if the "target" of a joke participates and laughs along with everyone else. It doesn't take much of this kind of conduct to make some employees feel that the workplace has become a hostile environment. Misunderstandings can lead to resentments, and a seemingly minor occurrence can then explode into a full-blown incident with devastating consequences for the operation.

Another recommended action is to establish a clear channel for all complaints from employees. When a legitimate complaint is filed, respond quickly and fairly. Employees must understand your expectations regarding appropriate behavior and how you expect everyone to be treated in the workplace. If you fail to do this, you will not establish a proper basis for corrective action, and such an attitude will encourage inappropriate behavior.

Diversity is here to stay, and a proactive approach to discrimination prevention should enable a golf course maintenance operation to make major strides toward creating a tolerant workplace. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. — — —>

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