



CIP SOCIETY ETHICS

A Question of Ethics: Overheard

What should you do when you have reason to believe a colleague is in an abusive relationship?

A claims manager is diligent about checking in on her employees and colleagues while they are working from home during the pandemic. She is thoughtful and concerned for their well-being as well as wanting to ensure that they have everything they need to do their jobs effectively.

Over a period of weeks, the claims manager starts to notice a change in the demeanour and appearance of one of her colleagues whenever they connect for Zoom calls. The formerly high-performing colleague has begun to appear increasingly disheveled, confused and lacking in professional interest. The slow deterioration continues, but the claims manager keeps her thoughts to herself.

During one Zoom call between just the two of them, the colleague says she has to step away to take care of some-

thing. She promises to reconnect in five minutes. However, she inadvertently leaves the Zoom call connected. The claims manager, who has stepped away from her computer to do some filing, is alarmed by sounds of dishes crashing and shouting, followed by what sounds like a slap. Instantly turning her attention to the computer screen, the claims manager witnesses her colleague engaged in a serious argument with her partner.

The claims manager is shaken and does not know what to do. It does not seem like a safe environment for her colleague, and thinks it is probably not a good idea to ask any questions on Zoom since the colleague's partner could overhear.

Should she email the colleague, or text her to ensure she is OK? What is the right thing to do?

Look for signals

Over the past year, domestic violence reports increased by 20% to 30% and crisis calls by 400% in some Canadian regions. A Statistics Canada survey released in early April 2020 reported one in 10 women answered they are “very or extremely” concerned about the possibility of violence in their homes due to the stress of confinement alone.

All employers have a legal responsibility under federal and provincial legislation to take every reasonable precaution to protect workers from hazards, including violence in the workplace and domestic violence that may occur in the workplace.

Good managers will want to connect with employees and colleagues on the incident while remaining compliant



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with provincial privacy and human rights laws. In this example, it is important not to exacerbate the situation. Looking back, the manager noticed strange behaviour for quite some time. It would have been appropriate for her to ask privately if everything was okay, and if there was anything she could do to help.

Signal for Help, a hand gesture that can be visually and silently shared during video calls to alert colleagues for help, was launched in Canada and the United States in April 2020. It is a one-handed sign that alerts family, friends and colleagues that an individual needs help and they would like someone to check in safely with them.

To make the signal, a person will place an open palm with a tuck thumb in front of a digital camera, then fold all their fingers over the thumb, forming a fist. If you see this signal:

- Reach out: use another form of communication (text, WhatsApp, social media, email).
- Listen: Ask yes or no questions.
- Respond: Only call 911 if the survivor asks. Let the survivor tell you how you can help.

Talking about domestic violence in the workplace goes a long way to eliminating the stigma. For those brave souls who do come forward, the most important thing you can do is to assure them that their pri-

vacancy will be protected, that they will receive support, and that their job is secure.

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Silence is not an option

In Ontario, the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* (OHSA) sets the standards of a person's right to work in an environment that is safe and free of harassment and violence. In an ideal world, both parties work for an organization that has a well-documented and communicated Workplace Violence Policy and Program. This would identify the roles and responsibilities of the employer and employees when, in this case, domestic violence is suspected.

Working from home is not a new concept, however, the pandemic has increased the number of people that are required to work from home. Whether or not an employee works from home, if an employer suspects domestic abuse, OHSA states that an employer should take “every precaution reasonable in the circumstances for the protection of the worker.” The details of that action are left to the individual employer to determine in their policies and procedures. These can include connecting the victim with internal and community resources and notifying the police or other emergency services when the threat of violence is immediate.

The critical action point in this scenario is to be mindful of the safety and privacy of the individual to respect the

sensitive nature of the situation. Confidentiality is of utmost importance, and the claims manager must not disclose the situation to any other party outside of the police, her supervisor or the HR representative.

It is the role of the employer to assist in next steps. Many employers have employee assistance programs. In Ontario, under the *Employment Standards Act*, there is a domestic or sexual violence leave that protects employees who are unable to work as a result of domestic or sexual violence.

Employers must cultivate an environment where employees feel responsible and committed to the health, safety and respect of all coworkers whether they be direct reports, colleagues or superiors. A review of current workplace violence and harassment policies should be revisited in light of the pandemic.

Staying silent cannot be an option, even as uncomfortable as that can seem. Lives depend on it.

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The CIP Society represents more than 18,000 graduates of the Insurance Institute of Canada's Fellow Chartered Insurance Professional (FCIP) and Chartered Insurance Professional (CIP) Programs. The CIP Society, through articles such as this, is working to bring ethical issues to the forefront and provide learning opportunities that enhance the professional ethics of all insurance professionals.



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