

From The Pence Rule To The Biden Effect

F forbes.com/sites/rogerdooley/2019/04/17/biden-effect/

April 17, 2019

Roger Dooley

Contributor

CMO Network Better business through brain and behavioral science

The Me Too movement has brought much attention to the topic of sexual harassment in businesses. While most attention has focused on internal interactions between colleagues or managers/subordinates, those aren't the only situations where harassment can occur. Sales interactions between different firms can also have an imbalanced power structure. Conferences and trade shows can bring individuals from marketing, sales and other functions together, often in settings far less formal than the office.



Businesses have responded in various ways, the most common being strengthening harassment policies as well as establishing better reporting and enforcement processes. But, at a time when personal discretion is still a key part of the solution, individuals are taking different approaches.

One of the more extreme approaches adopted by some managers is the Pence Rule. Vice President Mike Pence says that he avoids any appearance of impropriety by never dining or having drinks alone with a woman other than his wife. While never being alone with a person of the opposite sex is an effective way to avoid both harassment and accusations of that behavior, Pence's approach has been widely criticized as unfairly limiting mentoring and networking opportunities for women.

Social Science

The Pence Rule (adapted from the similar Billy Graham Rule) is usually viewed in the context of managers and subordinates, but it could impact inter-company relations as well. What if a male buyer refused to have dinner with female salespeople, for example? This is no small thing - research shows that persuasive messages are more effective when accompanied by a meal. Other studies described in that article found that negotiation outcomes were improved by socializing. Denying one group the opportunity for one-on-one socializing outside the office could clearly disadvantage the affected group.

The Biden Effect?

While the Pence Rule seems to have gained little traction, a greater concern is what I call "The Biden Effect." Recently, former Vice President Joe Biden was accused of making some women uncomfortable by unexpectedly getting too close to them and touching them. To be clear,

nobody was calling Biden a sexual predator or even accusing him of harassment. His behavior, which included shoulder touching and hugging, was seen by most as an indication of Biden's warm personality and an innocent way to connect with people.

After being called out for this behavior, Biden promised to be more respectful of people's personal space. Presumably, going forward we'll see more handshakes and very few embraces.

If the business world adopts (or mandates) the same approach as Biden seems likely to pursue, not all consequences will be positive.

On the plus side, people who don't like their space being invaded by others will be relieved. And some too-touchy individuals who annoy even those with a normal tolerance for contact will be reined in.

Touch and Trust

If the Biden Effect becomes real, though, we're likely to see a little less trust in the workplace.

Years of research by [Dr. Paul Zak](#) of Claremont Graduate University show that hugs or similar warm touches release oxytocin, a neurochemical that increases empathy and trust. While most offices aren't overrun with huggers, I've certainly seen the occasional mutually-welcomed hug, a hand on a shoulder, and similar displays.

In particular, leaders and senior team members have used touch to show some combination of dominance, affection and confidence. One wouldn't expect a junior clerk to put his arm around the CEO, but a senior executive putting a hand on the shoulder of a younger team member might (at least in the past) be seen as similar to what a coach or parent might do.

Zak himself is known for hugging new people he meets. But, he pre-announces his intention. About one in a hundred people decline, he says. With them, he shake hands. When I asked Zak about the Biden controversy, he found it silly, but noted, "If Biden had pre-announced his hug, it might seem less off-putting to some people."

A Tap on the Back

Other [research at Columbia University](#) showed that both male and female subjects who were guided to their seats with a brief touch on the shoulder by a female experimenter accepted higher levels of risk in a gambling scenario. If a male experimenter did the touching, however, the behavior of the subjects didn't change.

When I first wrote about that study, I suggested that salespeople, particularly females, might increase their persuasiveness with a similar light, very brief touch. After the Biden controversy, that advice seems, no pun intended, to be out of touch.

For casual workplace contact, pre-announcement won't always be viable. "Great job on the Ellsworth proposal, Matt. May I put my hand on your shoulder?" doesn't really work. In these cases being sensitive to the reactions and body language of other people is critical. One errant shoulder-touch is unlikely to be problematic compared to multiple instances that become annoying and even creepy.

I hold out some hope that the Biden Effect isn't real, and that appropriate touch can still be part of human interaction in business. Zak has worked with the U.S. military, and says, "They teach and use touch as an effective way to communicate and build bonds. If it works for soldiers, it will work for everyone!"