

Point Positive: Why We Need This Workshop Now More Than Ever

The potency of this workshop was sharing the room with guides and outfitters who want to do the work. They want to show up, they want to have difficult conversations, they want to learn. They want to be better. I am especially grateful for women, femme, non-binary, and minoritized people in our river community leading these conversations with resilience, grace, and excellency. They remind me Grand Canyon is for all, for me, for you: we are not burdened to hegemony. Things do change. It gets better. Join us.

—MADDIE FRIEND, RIVER GUIDE
Point Positive attendee

ON A WHIM, I DECIDED to attend the inaugural Point Positive Workshop: Effective Conversations and Interactions, at the 2019 Guides Training Seminar. Having spent twelve years (and counting) in academia, I am as well-acquainted with systemic sexual harassment in the workplace as river guides, hiking guides, and well, just about every woman* in every field ever. I have attended similarly-themed workshops over the years and have always felt that they were preaching to the choir. The people attending the workshops were rarely, if ever, the people who needed to be educated about behaviors that can be bullying or harassing. I admit that I assumed this workshop would be more of the same. As I walked into the room, I feared I would be proven correct. The workshop facilitator and most of the attendees were women. Young women. However, as more people trickled in, I was pleasantly surprised to see an almost even split of men and women, and an unexpected number of them were multi-decade veterans of the river (still young!...just skewing a bit older).

Workplace harassment is insidious. It can take so many forms and while some (bullying) are easier to spot than others (like a seeming compliment that has nothing to do with the person's ability to do their job), it can be easy to dismiss if you have not personally experienced it. Or maybe you have witnessed it, but it was happening to someone else and if you spoke up,

your own job was at risk. Is there any way to break this cycle so that we can all work in a positive and supportive environment?

This is where Point Positive can serve our community. It provides a safe forum for people to share their experiences, discuss their fears, listen to their colleagues, and learn how to be an ally. Emily Ambrose is a passionate and fiercely talented instructor who led a well-organized and inclusive workshop of an emotionally-charged topic with grace and humor. I know that all of us in attendance felt that we gained new communication skills to deal

with being either a direct participant or a witness in a harassment incident. I particularly liked how Emily used the framework of a patient assessment (we are all WFRS after all!) to build a template for actions that we can take to diffuse, manage, and monitor a situation. If you want to know more, attend the 2020 Point Positive workshop!

Much sooner than I would have liked, I found myself using these new tools on a river trip just two weeks after GTS. If you have ever

wondered why it “seems that people just can’t say something nice to someone anymore,” allow me to offer two examples of what it feels like to be on the receiving end of such comments.

LOCATION: Upstream of Unkar Delta

SCENE: I’ve just washed my hair in the river and am letting it dry. I turn around to find the old man (a client) staring at me and standing just a little too close.

OLD MAN: “Wow, your hair is so pretty when you let it down.” He repeats this several more times that evening. And the next morning. And the next afternoon. And the next day. And the day after that. It was awkward and creepy the first time. It just got creepier each time after.

ME, EACH TIME: “Ummm, thank you,” but with an ever-decreasing smile to go with it. Finally, I just say sharply, “John**”, you really need to stop talking



about my hair.” That puts him back on his heels a bit. He mutters something but at least he stops talking about my damn hair. Ewwwwww.

LOCATION: Bright Angel Trail

SCENE: Hiking out with a guide who has never missed an opportunity to comment on my looks in the three years we’ve known each other. (...but he always throws in something about my intelligence as if that makes it better...??)

GUIDE: “Melissa, I gotta tell you, I really love my wife but I’m very attracted to you.”

ME: ...As I pretend to ignore this statement, a thought strikes me—“oh my god...does he actually think I’m attracted to him??? That if only he weren’t married, I’d sleep with him????? Just because I’m friendly and I joke with him and I interact with him professionally as a fellow guide? Can he really be that oblivious?? This would be laughable if it wasn’t so disgustingly inappropriate. WTF?? Also, ewwwwwwww.”

Here are some ideas I learned from Point Positive that apply to the above examples:

1. Do not ignore the issue. Clearly and directly address it. It is never comfortable to do this, but it works (see: telling that guy to stop talking about my hair).
2. If you recognize any such behaviors in yourself, it is never too late to do better.
3. If you are about to compliment your colleague, is it about the job? Their ability? Or something completely unrelated that they may or may not have any control over (i.e. their physical appearance)?
4. If you find yourself about to say something like this to a colleague, stop.
5. Empathize. Put yourself in their position. Have they given you any indication that such advances are wanted? Have they given indications that such advances definitely are not wanted? Could it be that they are being friendly and professional (just as you would be to your other colleagues)? Do not mistake friendliness for “they must want to sleep with me.”
6. Consider the age difference—could you be their parent?? If you are in the Parent Zone, then stay there. Own the Zone. (Okay, this one came from my best friend, but he’s so right).

Sexual harassment is disturbingly common. Even for well-meaning people, it can be so easy to disregard somebody’s expertise, leadership, and accomplishments in favor of a “seemingly harmless”

comment about their looks. A simple comment is not always just a simple comment. Especially in the workplace. Even when your workplace is as awesome as the Grand Canyon.

“People will forget what you said, they’ll forget what you did, but they’ll never forget how you made them feel.”

—MAYA ANGELOU

We spend our trips striving to help our guests feel the magic of the Grand Canyon. Imagine the magic we can cast when we all feel supported and valued within our own Grand Canyon family.

Melissa Giovanni, Ph.D.

GRAND CANYON CONSERVANCY FIELD INSTITUTE

* Sexual harassment can and does happen to people of all genders and identities. I will use examples of a man harassing a woman, but please recognize that this can and does happen to everyone.

** names have been changed

Point Positive Workshop

The Point Positive Workshop Series is co-sponsored by the Whale Foundation and Grand Canyon River Guides.

We’re excited to make plans for another workshop sometime this fall, as well as next spring before the GTS. GCRG will send out an e-newsletter announcement beforehand with information on how to register. If you’re not already on the GCRG mailing list (Boatman’s Beta), you can click on the “Join the GCRG mailing list” link on our homepage at www.gcr.org. Get dialed in, and let’s move forward together!