

42

"Rowe Effort Commended by Navy"
by Charles H. Ball MIT Tech Talk

1993
February 3

HARASSMENT EXPERT

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News Office

As an MIT "ombudsperson," Mary Rowe usually works quietly, behind the scenes, to help resolve or refer problems and complaints—including allegations of harassment—brought to her by MIT students and employees.

Her work, however, did not go unnoticed by the United States Navy. Last summer, in the wake of the Tailhook scandal in which Naval personnel verbally and physically abused women officers and enlisted personnel, the Navy sought Dr. Rowe's assistance in the design of a more comprehensive dispute resolution system to prevent and deal with sexual and other harassment.

Recently, Navy Secretary Sean O'Keefe affixed his signature to a revamped and strengthened policy on harassment in the Navy and Marine Corps. And he also personally presented a medal to Dr. Rowe, an adjunct professor of management whose other official title at MIT is special assistant to the president.

Dr. Rowe received the the Meritorious Civilian Service Award for her work as an expert advisor to the Office of the Secretary of the Navy.

The citation accompanying the award stated: "Dr. Rowe's unique professional knowledge guided the [Sexual Harassment] Working Group in challenging fundamental assumptions and identifying essential issues related to harassment in the workplace. Her distinguished work in grievance procedures has been vital to the Department of the Navy in pursuing its objectives for development of a climate of mutual respect and dignity for all its members. Her extraordinary performance and substantial contributions have brought great credit to herself and the United States Navy."

Looking back to the time when she was asked to review a planned training program, Dr. Rowe said, "I was very ambivalent for many reasons. Among other concerns, I felt the training certainly was needed, but I kept asking myself if this was going to be a sincere effort."

That didn't stop Dr. Rowe from making "a great many suggestions," she said, a number of which were instrumental in the eventual reworking of the harassment training program for Navy and Marine personnel. Of nearly 780,000 uniformed active-duty Navy and Marine personnel, about 67,000 are women.

Nor did Dr. Rowe's involvement stop there. She was next asked to help design an "integrated dispute resolution system" that could be applied to different types of harassment complaints.

She began to believe in the commitment of the particular people she worked with, including Secretary O'Keefe, who had been appointed only a short time before, and Barbara Pope, the assistant secretary who spearheaded efforts for change.

In fact, Dr. Rowe spoke of the "extraordinary leadership and esprit de corps" of the dozens of women and men involved in designing change.

Secretary O'Keefe, who inherited the Tailhook and combat-duty-for-women issues, was outspoken in saying that the harassment issue "was the most important of his experience as Secretary," she said.

Assistant Secretary Pope, who Dr. Rowe said has been unflatteringly caricatured and persistently attacked by some men in the Navy and Navy Reserves, in Dr. Rowe's opinion "has shown courage, grace and powerful leadership on the issue of harassment."

She added: "The woman who heads the civilian personnel division has also been particularly effective in inspiring and coordinating an enormous amount of work. On the uniformed side, several male and female admirals and Marine generals, a woman Marine colonel and assorted captains and other ranks—women and men, Navy and Marine, black and Latino and white—have been working closely for months with many task-force teams for 14-hour days."

Asked to describe some of the matters she worked on, Dr. Rowe replied: "The Navy is picking up on what are currently seen around the country as some of the more successful elements of programs to prevent, stop and deal with harassment. If they go forward in their present plans, they will be doing two noteworthy things. The first is that they are innovating in some respects. The second is that they are determined to create an integrated dispute-resolution system rather than just one prevention program or grievance channel."

In designing the dispute-resolution system, Dr. Rowe said, the Navy decided to build its harassment-prevention program "directly and explicitly on the core values of the Navy and Marines, thus anchoring this effort directly on the central ethos of the service."

She provided this overview of the program: "Since the Department of the Navy's analyses indicated that alcohol plays a substantial role in abuse and harassment, the new program has integrated harassment training with alcohol-abuse training. In fact, harassment training is to be integrated into many other training programs—basic training, training for new commanding officers and the like. While most of the new program is oriented toward education and prevention, the Navy is also calling for mandatory processing toward administrative separation for certain proven, egregious acts of sexual harassment (for example quid pro quo harassment and sexual assault).

"There has been a careful review of many recommendations made in the past by broadly based study groups concerned with women's issues and careful study of Navy/Marine data collection on harassment and rape.

"A particularly interesting innovation is the adoption of a 'red light, yellow light, green light' logo and metaphor to communicate better about the complex subject of what is harassment and what isn't. The new training will include many examples of behavior that is 'red light' behavior—assault, repetitive sexist and racist stories and jokes, etc.; 'yellow light' behavior—caution areas; and 'green light' behavior—for example, appropriate supervisory criticism, commendations and compliments.

"The stoplight metaphor and the training attached to it are also to be integrated with the idea of 'individual responsibility and leadership' at all levels. A person who is harassed—especially by 'red light' behavior—is strongly encouraged not to ignore it, to prepare to deal with it, to seek advice from one or another of the Navy's resource groups and then to choose an option for action. (In fact the women Marines who designed the Marine training program chose to use the unusual word 'recipient' rather than the word 'victim' to describe a harassed person, in order to underline the individual responsibility that should be assumed by a person who is harassed, to empower that person to take action as she or he would in any other instance of witnessing unprofessional activity, and in order to underscore that person's right to make her or his own choices about appropriate options.)

"A person who is told by a complainant or a third party that she or he is harassing is urged to take responsibility for behaving thereafter in a completely professional manner, whatever that person's belief with respect to the appropriateness of the complaint. Bystanders are to take responsibility for interrupting and preventing harassment. And supervisors may not ignore any harassment which they see or which is reported to them, but must act, appropriately and fairly.

"In order to provide prompt, confidential advice to all, the Navy instituted an anonymous 800-line which is receiving many calls—some from supervisors, some from alleged harassers, as well as from people with complaints.

"The Navy is structuring a system with many informal and formal options for complainants. It is writing a skills booklet with sections addressed simultaneously to complainants, to people who are told they are harassing, to bystanders and to everyone in the chain of command, so that each person involved in a complaint will know the advice that is being given to others. Like many other employers, the Navy is integrating its approach to include all forms of harassment, with explicit re-commitment to leadership with respect to race."

Will it work? "That of course is the only really important question," said Dr. Rowe. "Decent people think it has to work."