Resource Guide

Preventing sexual harassment in the workplace must take place within the broader context of fostering mutual respect, achieving gender equity, and instilling a culture of inclusion.

Although recent focus on sexual harassment and assault in the workplace has gained significant attention, both have always existed and continue to persist across industry and workplaces. It's a complex problem to address and resolve. Most companies have well established sexual harassment training programs and comprehensive anti-harassment policies, but these investments have made little headway in effectively addressing a problem that pervades the workplace and communities. In too many organizations, workplace culture continues to be characterized by a male-dominated power structure, gender inequities, and a deeply entrenched code of silence and/or complicity, all of which contribute to create a climate in which discriminatory and harassing behavior is tolerated. Sexual harassment must also be understood and addressed in the context of multicultural perspectives. Different cultural backgrounds and experiences inform and affect their behaviors, attitudes and responses to harassment and workplace norms.

The recent avalanche of high-profile reports of sexual harassment and assault has sparked a national debate that is playing out in the media, corporate boardrooms, and in living rooms across the country. **It's time to bring the discussion into the organization.** The heightened momentum fuels the discussion and problem-solving around the root causes of discriminatory and harassing behaviors. Solutions to address the issue must focus on challenging and debunking social and institutional norms that contribute to creating the culture and climate in which sexual harassment occurs in the first place.

> According to the EEOC, a quarter of the nearly 30,000 workplace charges it received in 2016 involved harassment. The statistics do a poor job representing the problem. Another EEOC study found that 70 percent of workers who experienced sexual harassment never reported it, and 75 percent of individuals that did report sexual harassment experienced some form of retaliation. Marginalizing and alienating 50 percent of the workforce by not effectively addressing and taking steps to prevent sexual harassment behavior is a prescription for disaster.

Ensure gender balanced discussions

Creating and sustaining work environments built on inclusion and respect will only succeed if all members are involved, and men in particular, are invited into the discussion. The approach has to be carefully planned and safely navigated. Conversations about sexual harassment and assault can trigger strong reactions and emotions: for example, women can get angry, and men can quickly get to a point of shame and disengagement.

Men (and women) are already pushing back on the increased scrutiny on sexual harassment and apprehensive about misperceptions or misinterpretations of interactions between men and women in the workplace. Increased focus on the issue runs the risk of creating a situation in which men avoid interactions with women in the workplace, including not inviting them into their inner circle, as the safest course of action. This response further disenfranchises women by limiting crucial access to sponsorships, mentoring, power-brokering, networking and other professional interactions that are key to advancement. Productive conversations must address and resolve these reactions, and at the same time, allow opportunities to discuss points of contention.

Working in collaboration to tackle the problem of sexual harassment empowers different perspectives and opens dialogue about the issue and its impact.

By providing opportunities to interact with both men and women to solve the problem, organizations can begin to understand the ways in which male privilege and patriarchy play out in the workplace, and the complicity in fostering it. Building relationships of trust and accountability between men and women in the workforce is a critical factor in addressing the issue and achieving genuine gender inclusion.

Questions to get the conversation started:

- Why should we be discussing sexual harassment in the workplace?
- How would you describe the organization's culture with regard to gender equity and sexual harassment?
- What role do men and women play in creating or fostering that culture?
- What concerns do you have with regard to the new attention on sexual harassment in the workplace?
- Describe the level of accountability employees are expected to have regarding the enforcement of sexual harassment in the workplace.
- Does this differ by level, race, gender? If so, what are the implications to the varying levels of accountability?
- Are definitions of workplace sexual harassment clearly defined and interpreted? (e.g. is dating allowed, or is it considered sexual harassment?)
- Could women be at a further disadvantage by the #metoo focus, particularly if men are hesitant to mentor/sponsor? How do we resolve this?
- How do we ensure open dialogue and greater understanding of the issues?

Tips on Facilitating an Open Dialogue

Organizations can consider engaging their women's' ERG to champion and lead the conversation. ERG members can be tasked with bringing a male counterpart or colleague to the discussion. Consider splitting the group up first in same gender groups to answer some of the questions, and then come back together as a group to discuss. It will be important to ensure a skilled facilitator is in the room to attend to group dynamics and ensure all perspectives are heard.

Resources for engaging men in #metoo discussions:

- ➔ DBP Insight Paper: Engaging White Men as D&I Champions and Allies
- ➔ White Ribbon Research Series: Men as Allies in Preventing Violence Against Women
- ➔ Wearemanenough is an online forum providing men with tools for self-reflection and strategies for standing up for women.
- ➔ Digging Deep: Tools and Resources for D&I Champions

Power and Hierarchy Play a Role

Sexual harassment and assault is a power issue; in the workplace, it is also a productivity issue. Data shows that in most organizations, the power hierarchy starts with males at the top and ends with women at the bottom. Companies have spent time, money and effort to address inequity through policies, programs, processes and strategies, yet in many organizations, the power imbalance is still pervasive and deeply embedded in the culture. In some companies, both women and men are complicit, further promulgating the disadvantaged space that women already occupy in the workforce. Organizations must take concrete steps to build accountability and establish opportunities for greater equity to shift the power imbalance. This will pave the path to achieving an inclusive culture in which all members are respected and valued.

Some actions to consider include:

- Provide women the opportunity to mentor men (and/or women) and lead the effort
- Engage senior leadership in championing equity and promoting a no tolerance position on the issue
- Provide language and tools to enable bystanders to speak out and up (become "upstanders")

Clearly articulate position, policies, and penalties

Behaviors associated with sexual harassment are especially at risk of occurrence when organizations don't clearly articulate guidelines against harassment, establish procedures and protections for reporting it, or enforce penalties for offenses committed. When unacceptable behavior does occur, quick and decisive action is crucial. In a Washington Post-ABC News poll, 64 percent of respondents say that sexual harassment in the workplace is a serious problem and that men who sexually harass female coworkers usually get away with it.

Conduct and behaviors that constitute sexual harassment must be well defined in company policies and understood throughout the organization. In today's workplace, boundaries between professional and social behaviors are increasingly blurred. A recent survey by The Economist found that approximately 25 percent of millennial-age men think asking someone out for a drink is harassment. More than a third of millennial men and women say that if a man compliments a woman's looks it is harassment. One-on-one interactions between employees at different levels of the organization, including mentoring and sponsoring, build trust and contribute to productive working relationships. Companies need to ensure their policies don't go too far and overcorrect for the bad behavior of a few by penalizing and restricting the interaction and opportunity to build productive relationships for the many.

➔ SHRM provides a wide range of Workplace Harassment Resources related to legal compliance, reporting procedures, investigations, training and education, case studies, and establishing inclusive policies focused on prevention.
➔ The National Women's Law Center Strengthening Workplace Sexual Harassment Protections and Accountability – Resources and Toolkit, provides an overview of state-by-state differences, policy guidance, and numerous strategies focused on prevention.

Revisit Sexual Harassment Training

Many sexual harassment training programs effectively address knowledge of the law, share relevant policies, and provide instructions for reporting, but miss important opportunities to develop soft skills, such as building empathy, recognizing personal bias, creating situational awareness, and understanding how certain behaviors, regardless of intent, can have negative impact. Best practice companies are shifting the focus of sexual harassment training from compliance with the law to promoting respect in the workplace generally. Training and education programming that encourages employees to assess their complicity, accountability, and role as allies can have tangible impact on stopping harassing behavior.

Rather than focusing strictly on the roles of perpetrator and victim, the EEOC also recommends implementing bystander intervention training which has proved successful in combating sexual harassment on school campuses, in the military, and in non-profits. Bystanders are defined as witnesses to the behavior who take no action. Bystander training utilizes a "community of responsibility" approach to empower and train bystanders in how to safely intervene when they witness unacceptable behavior, turning them into "upstanders".
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Anonymous workplace climate surveys can also help the organization understand the true impact and scope of harassment in the workplace and pinpoint appropriate training and education interventions. If the organization parses their survey results by demographics, they may also come to understand which populations may be disproportionately affected.

➔ The EEOC [Study of Harassment in the Workplace](#) provides a comprehensive set of recommendations for preventing sexual harassment in the workforce, including guidance and links to resources for implementing bystander training.

Conclusion

The problem of harassment is not confined to any one industry, and organizations that take a 'not us' position are opening themselves up to significant risk. Ignoring or discounting sexual harassment complaints legitimizes the behavior and sends a message that unacceptable conduct is tolerated and even condoned. This is bad for morale and productivity and can have a devastating impact on brand and reputation when exposed.

Preventing sexual harassment must take place within the broader context of cross-collaboration, gender equity, mutual respect, and a culture of inclusion. Harassment in the workplace will not stop on its own, and for many organizations a major shift in culture is called for. Tackling difficult conversations head-on will be challenging. Organizations that provide safe forums to openly talk about differing perceptions and experiences outside gender frameworks and comfort zones will be best positioned to create solutions.

It's time to 'lean in' to productive cross-gender relationships at work and foster dialogue and collaboration. The solution lies beyond simply training and awareness. Addressing organizational culture, power balance and equity to create a culture in which sexual harassment behaviors don't exist in the first place must take priority.