

Will #MeToo Create Change in the Workplace?

Through extensive media coverage, awareness of sexual harassment and misconduct has no doubt increased. But many may be left wondering if we will actually see changes in the workplace as a result of this visibility.

To help answer this question, Candace Bertotti and David Maxfield conducted an online opt-in survey of 1,100 individuals about their own experiences and observations and published their findings in a [recent article](#) in the Harvard Business Review.

What is, perhaps, not surprising about the outcome is that, while the majority of **respondents saw the movement(s) as “helpful,” only a small percentage reported positive** improvements in their offices. What the survey results did reveal, however, is that even though there were few reported improvements, the issues behind #MeToo are entirely too great to ignore.

For example, 41 percent of women surveyed indicated that they know someone who has shared their story since the beginning of the movement, and 28 percent had shared their own story. What was possibly most concerning was the fact that nearly half of the women surveyed (48 percent) noted that they have a story they have not yet shared, and nearly half of the men surveyed said they had done something in the past that today might be labeled as sexual harassment or misconduct.

In response to these findings, the authors offer three recommendations of actions leaders should take in the short-term, as one aspect of a larger, multi-faceted approach to substantially reduce workplace sexual harassment.

1.) Measurement and accountability: Ask about sexual harassment on culture or engagement surveys. Results could be incorporated into performance objectives, reviews or promotions. Asking employees to voluntarily sign a pledge or commitment publicly, which would be renewed periodically, could also increase accountability, according to Bertotti and Maxfield.

2.) Identification of ‘change champions’: Ask leaders and other influential employees to volunteer to champion the **organization’s efforts to produce change in this area (e.g., initiatives, trainings, policies, etc.)**.

When led solely by HR, employees may perceive the initiatives as isolated to specific units or teams or, worse, merely lip service. Eliminating sexual harassment and misconduct may

seem like a daunting task but encouraging a few key individuals in the organization to take **the charge will no doubt motivate others to join in... or at least participate in the** conversation.

3.) Training for difficult conversations: Harassment and misconduct aside, men and women need to be able to work well together without discomfort and/or concern about false accusations. Employees must be equipped to manage uncomfortable and awkward situations before they escalate. Simply feeding information without offering skills to act will cause frustration, the authors note, and may do more harm than good.

Whether coaching, mentoring or participating in one-on-one meetings with members of the opposite sex, both parties need to have a shared understanding of what is appropriate and what is not. Case studies are a great way to paint a picture of the multi-faceted nature of sexual harassment and misconduct.

Finally, training should also provide opportunities to rehearse the reporting process, including how to document, report and escalate a problem.

I recently read one woman's response on LinkedIn to another gentleman's incredibly biased comment against women in the workplace and it stuck with me. She indicated that she was glad he spoke up because "mold can't grow where the sun shines." It occurred to me, then, that the first step in mitigating sexual harassment and misconduct in the workplace may simply be to shine a light on the magnitude and nature of the problem, so that real and lasting change can occur.

About the Author

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