



THE EVOLUTION OF #METOO – A CALL TO BRAVERY

How to Communicate Your Commitment to a Harassment Free Workplace

It's been more than a year since I first [wrote](#) about the emerging #MeToo movement and its impact on employers. A lot has changed since then. While I knew more would come to light regarding the harassment of women in the workplace, I am surprised at the breadth and scope of what the #Me Too movement has exposed. Every day, we hear more examples of extreme sexual misconduct and sometimes of sexual violence in the workplace. Just recently, Senator Martha McSally, one of the first female US Air Force combat pilots, bravely and publicly spoke about her rape at the hands of a superior officer and after years of sexual harassment allegations, chef Mario Batali was bought out by his restaurant partners.

In the past, for many the response to sexual misconduct in the workplace was a simple risk decision. A victim had to consider many things. What would the cost be if I reported an inappropriate act by a co-worker, a superior, a customer or a client? What impact would it have to my job/position, my family and my future employability? Will anyone care or believe me? What happens if I am not believed and I can't prove what I claim?

In today's climate, more victims feel safe to come forward and report incidents of sexual misconduct. There are a variety of reasons for this, but most likely it is because of the stories being told by brave individuals who have risked public shaming, retaliation in the workplace and skepticism. There is safety in numbers and individual survivors no longer have to go unheard.

Many workplaces are responding bravely as well, of course, some more quickly than others. No longer can a workplace afford a culture which allows, hides or is unresponsive to the claims of sexual harassment or sexual violence. Many organizations have and/or are working to document and put in place mechanisms for reporting concerns and processes for objectively investigating them. They have set up 24/7 hotlines for anonymous reporting. They have enhanced their employee relations and human resources staffs to address these critical issues. They have provided training to employees and managers to comply with legal requirements. While all of these things are good and will hopefully continue to chip away at harassment issues, there still remains a gap in the simple and honest way we address sexual harassment and sexual violence in the workplace. Organizations must be honest.

Sexual harassment and sexual violence are uncomfortable topics and organizational cultures do not change overnight; however, having open and honest discussions about these topics must take place to expose them to the light of day. No person, regardless of gender, should feel safe or comfortable if they are an abuser.

So, how do organizations communicate their commitment to a harassment free environment?

1. Organizational leadership must be unabashed in admitting its weaknesses in this area. So often when organizations find themselves in the midst of difficult allegations or investigations, they become frozen with fear and silent. Inaction and silence can look like complicity to a victim of sexual harassment or violence and to many organizational stakeholders. Even in the early stages of a public investigation, an organization can overtly communicate its support of a truthful and objective investigative process and demonstrate its support by full and transparent cooperation. This can be a risk, especially if an organization has not taken appropriate action in the past. The victims of sexual harassment and sexual violence deserve a little organizational risk.

2. If an allegation is being investigated, the organization does not have to wait until everything is known and potentially litigated to make changes. If there are weaknesses in management, processes or training which are identified in an investigation, they should be addressed as soon as possible. Taking personnel action against an involved party does not always have to wait until the investigation is fully complete. Employers have many options to include termination for employees who do not comply with company policies and procedures. In many instances, investigations reveal a broader scope and variety of non-compliance by involved employees. Choosing to protect itself from a wrongful termination suit has often been a shield to hide behind for organizations unwilling to take action in sexual harassment and abuse matters. An organization committed to a harassment free environment cannot hide behind such a shield.

3. When organizations are faced with allegations that are found to be untrue during or after a full and objective investigation, the innocent should be exonerated. Organizations are under a great deal of pressure by advocates and their workforces to always support the word of victims. Every allegation should be considered serious and every person willing to come forward should be treated respectfully. However, as we have seen in some very public settings, not all who claim to be are victims. In these confusing cases, there may be other motives at play. Organizations not only have to be brave enough to take action against the abusers and harassers but also against those who make false claims and undermine the testimonies of actual victims. This can be especially hard and difficult for organizations in today's world.

Being truthful and honest can be hard but it has to be where we start.



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