



Is your corporate strategy ready for #MeToo?

Imagine opening the newspaper and seeing a story about a member of your senior executive team who has been accused of sexual harassment. What would you do if a female employee came into your office sobbing and told you she has been sexually assaulted at work? What if you had a star employee give you notice of resignation, with rumours swirling she was in a relationship with a co-worker that went sideways?

In November, we saw headlines about the very public resignation of the CEO of McDonald's, Steve Easterbrook, over his romantic relationship with an employee. In the same month, we learned TMX Group is investigating allegations of sexual harassment against CEO Lou Eccleston.

Public interest in #MeToo has led to a flood of studies and surveys which have further demonstrated the pervasiveness of sexual harassment at work. Statistics Canada released a report in 2018, finding 29 per cent of women had "experienced unwanted sexual behaviour at work." That's one in three — think about how many women work in your organization and apply that math.

While there have long been compelling reasons to focus on respect in the workplace, like good corporate citizenship and employee well-being, there is now hard data on the prevalence of workplace sexual harassment and its impact on market performance and profitability. A recent study by a team of researchers from three major Canadian universities found a high incidence of workplace sexual harassment



negatively correlated with both stock-market performance and profitability.

There are several key components to developing a respectful workplace strategy. Policy and training have long been the exclusive, go-to approaches for tackling sexual harassment at work. While policy and training are still an important part of any respectful workplace strategy, they cannot be effective when used in isolation. A more comprehensive and nuanced approach is needed.

POLICY

Every organization must have a respectful workplace policy that addresses bullying and harassment, including sexual harassment. In British Columbia, WorkSafeBC has a legislated mandate that requires employers to have a bullying and harassment policy. In most, if not all, jurisdictions in Canada, this is the law. Many provincial regulators have downloadable sample policies on their websites, and there are many online resources for policy language. The problem with a downloaded policy is that it almost certainly won't apply perfectly to your workplace. There is no one size fits all. Ef-

fective policies not only comply with legal requirements, but are also readable and written in plain language [not legalese] and include examples that are relevant to the particular industry and workplace.

TRAINING

In areas of the United States, harassment training has been legally required for decades. However in 2016, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission released a study which found no evidence training was effective, based on 30 years of historical data. This study, and numerous academic papers that followed, have recommended a complete overhaul of workplace harassment training.

One critical flaw is the exclusive focus on the perpetrator and the victim. The point of the training was to encourage victims to speak up and tell harassers to stop. These two groups, victims and harassers, are a tiny percentage of any workforce and yet everyone is made to sit through this training.

The best practice is to broaden the focus of the training to be relevant to everyone. Bystander activation training creates a

shared sense of responsibility for workplace respect and enables employees to practise skills they might use to diffuse or intervene in workplace harassment.

AND MORE!

Training and policies are not enough on their own — leadership from the top down is critical. Corporate buy-in can be demonstrated by including an express commitment to respect in the workplace in strategic plans and corporate communications.

Followup is also key. Harassment training has too often been a box-checking exercise — go to the training, sign the attendance sheet, listen [or not] and go back to your desk. Successful workplace training includes identified goals and measures to track effectiveness, as well as scheduled followups on the topics discussed.

LEADING CHANGE

Many organizations have strategic goals including recruitment, retention and succession planning. It is increasingly common to also see diversity, inclusion, gender equity and corporate responsibility for employee well-being at the forefront.

Each of these key performance indicators can be directly impacted by sexual harassment and respect, which in turn affects overall market performance and profitability. Women are taking a stand against workplace sexual harassment and the #MeToo movement is holding companies accountable. Whether driven by people or profit [or both], it is time for a proactive approach. **ITC**