

# SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN THE WORKPLACE

## What employers need to know

A fundamental cultural shift is causing widespread pushback against sexual harassment in our workplaces. People who have either experienced or witnessed misconduct at work are refusing to tolerate inappropriate behaviors as “just part of doing business.” And because sexual harassment is more than likely occurring within your company in one way or another, now is the time to dedicate resources to help create a fairer, safer, and more respectful environment for all.<sup>1</sup>

Here are a few ways to help prepare, prevent, and respond, as well as transform your workplace into a sexual harassment-free culture:

### PREPARE



**Take a look.** Review and update your organization's sexual harassment policy. Do it today if you haven't done so recently. Make sure your policies and procedures for reporting are broad enough to protect **all** employees—including those who work off site and in client settings.

**Go wide.** Make it clear that absolutely **everyone**—regardless of rank or status—is subject to your policies. Company leaders must emphasize that **we all** have a responsibility to stop bullying, uncivil workplace behaviors, exclusion, and gender inequities that may be reinforced and internalized by people of all genders.

**Think smart.** Recognize that employees are not equally likely to be targets of sexual harassment. People from marginalized groups—whose identities may intersect across gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, age, socio-economic status, sexuality, or ability—can be the most vulnerable to harassment. Pay attention to these subtleties.

**Make it fair.** Develop an impartial investigative process. Consider delegating this function to an outside firm to ensure due process. Get an updated procedure in place now, before you need it.

**Make it easy.** Construct multiple channels for reporting harassing behavior, including an anonymous phone or email tip line. Communicate proactively and often with employees about exactly what these are and how to use them.



## PREVENT



**Be crystal clear.** Cultivate a zero-tolerance policy that is regularly communicated by HR and top leaders to everyone— including clients, suppliers, and customers. No person, partner organization, or setting is too important to be exempt.

**Spell it out.** Don't assume everyone already knows what constitutes sexual harassment and will act to avoid it. Teach them well. Educate your staff on off-limit behaviors, including:<sup>2</sup>

- 1. PATRONIZING:** "Sexist but nonsexual comments, gestures, or condescension."
- 2. TAUNTING:** "Sexual gestures, physical displays, and overly personal comments and queries producing a sexually hostile environment."
- 3. PREDATORY:** "Even more threatening, encompassing sexual solicitation, promises or threats, touching, and forced sexual contact."

**Do something.** Institute bystander intervention training, and reinforce its importance at all levels of seniority.

### Tell it like it is.

Quickly address unwitting or covert incidences of sexism, prejudice, and bigotry with frank feedback. Telling a sexist joke may not be a firing offense, but it is an opportunity to improve attitudes, and will reduce the likelihood of negative behaviors in the workplace.

**Get to even.** Work toward gender parity at all levels, including the board of directors. When power is shared across gender, harassment levels go down.

## RESPOND



**Get serious.** Take all complaints, and their potential impacts, seriously. Never treat an accuser or an accused with scorn, or expose or isolate them.

**Lean on me.** Make sure the people who are targets and complainants are properly supported. This includes protecting them from retaliation and further harassment.

**Act promptly.** Gather the information you need and determine an appropriate response based on your policy. Create a feedback loop to ensure ongoing and timely follow up with the person who has been targeted and others indirectly affected.

## TRANSFORM



**Be inclusive every day.** Policies and practices are not foolproof. Actively promote a culture of inclusion that does not tolerate sexual harassment or discrimination in any form. No one should feel like an outsider in your company.

**Make it safe.** Sexual harassment breeds in silence, which is fed by fear and shame. Managers should make it clear that they will support employees who speak up about harassing and bullying behaviors.

**R-E-S-P-E-C-T.** Make respect a core value in your workplace. Leaders—from the board to the C-suite to managers to individual contributors—need to set the tone with daily practices that affirm each employee's merit, regardless of power differentials that arise from titles, gender, race, age, and other characteristics.

**Make no excuses.** Consuming alcohol is linked to higher risk of sexual harassment. It should never be used as an excuse or a source of blame. Examine your organization's culture around drinking, and create a climate where sexual harassment is understood as a serious offense, no matter what the setting or conditions.

**It's up to all of us.** Broadcast accountability. Make every employee aware of their responsibility in creating positive cultural change, including recognizing and interrupting harassing and bullying behaviors, supporting coworkers, and affirming coworker experiences.

### SOURCES:

1 The actions listed here are based on a detailed summary of research on sexual harassment. See Lauren P. Daley, Dnika J. Travis, and Emily S. Shaffer, *Sexual Harassment in the Workplace: How Companies Can Prepare, Prevent, Respond, and Transform Their Culture* (Catalyst 2018).

2 Lindsey Joyce Chamberlain, Martha Crowley, Daniel Tope, and Randy Hodson, "Sexual Harassment in Organizational Context," *Work and Occupations*, vol. 35, no. 3 (August 2008): p. 262-295.

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