
Training Harassment's First Responders

The long-smoldering flames of sexual harassment in the workplace have recently mushroomed into a full-fledged wildfire. Past decades of high-level misconduct revealed across industries are now combining into a devastating firestorm. Executives are increasingly looking in the mirror as well as speaking out. In fact, during a recent Seyfarth Shaw at Work training session, the CEO of a midwestern U.S. investment firm stood up and made the following (unprecedented) declaration to his employees: "I don't want to be stepping over any lines in how I (or other leaders here) treat any of you. So, if you ever feel uncomfortable with my conduct or that of any executive, supervisor or colleague, please simply "forget the chain of command." Go over anyone's head. And, if I am directly part of the situation, in any way, please go right to internal legal." Numerous company owners have recently been asking us, in private, for strategies to avoid becoming unwitting harassment enablers. Earlier this week, the CFO of a global real estate company requested intensive training focused on supporting colleagues receiving unwanted customer attention.

The near-daily headlines of top-down misconduct and harassment have clearly lit a fire under leaders. We have rarely heard this rapidity and range of requests and comments and commitments coming directly from high-ranking executives. While such C-Suite statements do not constitute confessions of illegal acts by a company or individual; they do symbolize the wake-up calls that at least some in positions of corporate power are now heeding. Many leaders we know are aiming to, as stated in a commonly heard core value, "do the right thing." Other executive re-evaluations are, admittedly, being fueled by a perceptible cultural shift in the power dynamic, with victims collectively wielding increasing influence and clout. From the #MeToo campaign of social media to long-lasting digital evidence of wrong-doing, damning allegations and publicity spread at lightning speed, and falling back on the "he said, she said" defense is less palatable or effective. In addition to today's social media maelstrom, several states are now considering banning secret settlements and non-disclosure agreements that power players often relied on to protect their reputation and their position. This could prove to be a critical trend that will likely continue, and aware executives know it.

The attention and potentially changing legal landscape means, as an HR leader at a Fortune 10 manufacturer told me, "People at the top are now listening, reacting and realizing they should have paid more attention. All good for us in the compliance business -- if we know how to maximize the moment." Needed Now: A Culture of First Responders It is no secret that a strong, explicit commitment from high-level executives to harassment prevention is essential for credible internal messaging and building a culture of respect. If the current zeitgeist creates increased commitment from those at the top, forward thinking organizations should leverage the

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP

moment to direct resources and better foster a culture where people can and will speak-up for one another. Behavioral and culture change in any organization is often the result of both external (tightening laws) as well as internal (drum beat of positive peer pressure from colleagues) forces. It is about individuals (at all levels) not only seeing the risks and result of inappropriate and degrading conduct, but collectively understanding the lines between disrespect and dignity.

This requires helping people build consensus about when these lines are crossed and how easy it is to play a first-responder role in safely pushing back at those critical moments. Recent Trends As of this writing, concrete actions to equip staff as "first responders" are starting to take hold within organizations we track and support -- any and/or all of which actions are replicable across most industries. Executives are increasingly asking for one-on-one "Best Practice Consults" to avoid actions/omissions that may turn them into unwitting enablers, as well as for company-wide strategies to imprint norms and first responder intervention skills on all future leaders.

Organizations, meanwhile, are increasingly focused on encouraging and simplifying internal reporting processes. Organizations are also providing skills and tools to address "gateway conduct" such as leaders dressing down subordinates, which many have seen devolving over time into more egregious behavior. Organizations are increasingly committing to highly interactive, practical training programs and tools that turn every employee into a "first responder" by equipping them to spot a colleague's discomfort; supporting colleagues by using a step up/speak-up model; and knowing when and how to call for reinforcements. First Responder Language Effective intervention language/scripts provided to "first responders" often include phraseology that is targeted to a specific organization and environment. This is all about surmounting barriers of unease and reluctance to appropriately, safely and collectively "check" those starting to cross a line of conduct/norms (including peers at the C-suite level).

That is why even the simplest, most user-friendly scripts, or "first responses" can prove surprisingly effective when they are built into a larger and cohesive culture strategy. Some examples of simple first responses derived and adapted from recent client training sessions include: "Stay strategic!" (executive-to-executive); "Just treat them like a VIP" (for hospitality companies); and "Seriously, you really didn't say that? C'mon dude!" (for millennial-related environments). To combat the conflagration of workplace sexual harassment, everyone should be equipped with practical tools to serve as collective "first responders" for the sake of both dignity and safety. Organizations must help employees at all levels to find a voice so that they can react, respond and quickly douse flames of disrespect on behalf of others.

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

[GET HELP](#)