

It is not up to film stars to sort out workplace harassment

Three steps to changing a culture

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'The first step is to accept that, according to the statistics, sexual harassment is almost certainly happening in your workplace' © Getty

Margaret Heffernan FEBRUARY 18, 2018

“I do hope the movie stars don’t give up on the #MeToo movement and move on to something else.”

The speaker was a senior consultant, and it was a private conversation. He was trying to articulate his sympathy for the men and women who have spoken out against harassment at work. He wanted the campaign to succeed. But his comment exuded abject passivity: fixing the problem was up to the “actresses” — not him.

My first response was outrage, my second was pragmatic. This consultant’s perspective was the same as that of many male and female managers I know. They support women and they are against harassment. They have not experienced or perpetrated sexual harassment themselves, but they probably know people who have, though they may be unaware of that. So they have power and goodwill but they do not know what to do with them. This column is for them.

The first step is to accept that, according to the statistics, sexual harassment is almost certainly happening in your workplace. Research shows that the proportion of workers who say they have been harassed stands at between [20 per cent](#) and [53 per cent](#) for women depending on the survey; for men, it is somewhere between 7 and 20 per cent. Unless you work in a very, very small business, this is your problem now.

Senior leaders must now be prepared to stake their reputations on fair, safe workplaces

The second step is to recognise that harassment is against the law in the UK under the Equality Act 2010 [section 26](#). It does not matter if it was intentional or not. According to Meriel Schindler, head of the employment team at Withers law firm and a leading London-based employment lawyer, “If I put porn up in my open-plan office without intending to upset the person next to me, I am creating a degrading

environment. It does not matter that I did not intend it to violate anyone's dignity or to create an intimidating, hostile, humiliating or offensive environment; that is what ordinary harassment is about."

Much the same applies in the US, where, as part of equal opportunity legislation, sexual harassment of men or women is against the law.

The third step is to understand that everyone is watching. What will your organisation do? The old responses — brush it under the carpet, quietly manage out the junior party — will not work. All those purpose and values statements, ethics exhortations and workforce engagement strategies: you can kiss them goodbye when you turn a blind eye to harassment that everyone sees and talks about. As Ms Schindler says, the past six months have seen networks trump hierarchy.

Everyone's eyes are on employers. After decades of failed [diversity initiatives](#), will management grasp the nettle and change anything? Which senior leaders — male or female — are stepping up and demanding action? Who remains silent?

The obvious policies have to work in practice. An ethics phone line that no one answers will not cut it any more — attention must be paid not just to policies but also to their practical impact.

Which employers will follow Cambridge university, by [measuring sexual misconduct](#) and tracking progress in dealing with it? In the past five years, fewer than six incidents of sexual misconduct were reported formally at the university per term. But since it launched an anonymous online form to allow staff to report incidents, 173 were reported in just nine months. The university's project is watched with interest.

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Who in senior management will stand alongside those with grievances to ensure they are investigated firmly and fairly? Will you volunteer? Which non-executive director will personally guarantee that every reported case is taken seriously and dealt with quickly? That is the undertaking I have made on one board on which I sit. I want to reassure myself our promise is serious and real.

Now is an excellent time to introduce [reverse mentoring](#), in which senior executives receive feedback from junior staff. I have seen this work well in large organisations where leaders were paired with young workers of different genders, ethnicity and sexual orientation.

Being told how they come across to others, where they cross lines or step on toes, can be chastening but informative. Many leaders shrug their shoulders and say it is just too difficult these days to know what is acceptable behaviour and what is not. But it is not hard — junior mentors will tell you. Seeing yourself and your organisation through young eyes makes a difference to how you communicate and behave. Ms Schindler says this is particularly effective at board level, where it is hard to know what is really going on.

Senior leaders must now be prepared to stake their reputations on fair, safe workplaces. As we have seen with [Oxfam](#) and the [Catholic Church](#), it is naive to assume that your organisation's reputation and higher purpose will protect you.

This is an existential moment for everyone in management. It is not up to film stars to sort it out. It is up to you.

Letter in response to this article:

[*Do companies want to be told about harassment? / From Robert Marinelli, Dubai*](#)

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