



Addressing Workplace Sexual Harassment in a Government Contracting Company Through Organizational Consulting

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ABSTRACT

Sexual harassment and workplace hostility towards women have significant implications for an organization's employees to collaborate and trust each other. Recent news reports highlighting prominent figures accused of unwanted and inappropriate behavior towards women and men in the workplace has brought a much-needed awareness of what has been an ongoing and often silent issue of sexual harassment. Although one has witnessed what seemingly appears to be an unprecedented number of claims of sexual harassment with the rise of the #MeToo movement, it is surprising that the Equal Opportunity Commission (EEOC) has estimated 75% of individuals who are harassed in the workplace do not file a complaint. This paper explores a case study of an organizational consulting intervention around workplace sexual harassment.

KEYWORDS

Gender Discrimination, Gender Inequity in the Workplace, Sexual Harassment, Workplace Conflict

INTRODUCTION

Recent news reports high lighting prominent celebrity figures accused of unwanted and inappropriate behavior towards women and men in the workplace has brought a much-needed awareness of what has been an ongoing and often silent issue of sexual harassment. In public there has been an unprecedented number of claims of sexual harassment with the rise of the #MeToo movement, it is surprising that the Equal Opportunity Commission (EEOC) has estimated 75% of individuals who are harassed in the workplace do not file a complaint (EEOC, 2019). Sexual harassment claims have a dire impact on both the individual who raised the claim and to the organization. From an individual perspective,

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physical and mental health problems, low earnings, lack of career progression, and persistent gender wage gaps are what some women experience who have been targets of sexual harassment (Shaw, Hegewisch, Phil & Hess, 2019). Organizations can expect employee turnover, decreased productivity, absenteeism, and not to mention the legal cost to address and investigate claims that are disruptive to the continuance and sustainability of the organization.

Sexual harassment is defined as unwanted, nonconsensual sexual behavior that impacts the victim's life (Blum, 2019). It can be both verbal and nonverbal and includes unwelcome sexual advances or requests for sexual favors (Blum, 2019). Harassment can take many forms, such as verbal acts of name-calling or written statements or actions that may be physically threatening (Blum, 2019). The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) provides a clear explanation of what to report about acts of sexual harassment (Equal Employment Opportunity, 2019). According to the EEOC (2019), it is unlawful to harass a person (an applicant or employee) because of that person's sex. Harassment can include "sexual harassment" or unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature (EEOC, 2019). Harassment does not have to be sexual, however, and can include offensive remarks about a person's sex. For example, it is illegal to harass a woman by making offensive comments about women in general (EEOC, 2019). *Quid pro quo* and a hostile work environment are legal definitions of sexual harassment (Boyer, 2018). *Quid pro quo* refers to behaviors by a superior who promotes or demotes an employee contingent upon sexual favors in the workplace (Boyer, 2018).

Case Study Methodology

This case study represents a government consulting information technology company. The organization has had several significant sexual harassment complaints. For the case study, Global Defense Technologies will be used as the fictitious name to protect the privacy of this organization to frame this intervention. Global Defense Technologies only has 100 female employees and 850 male employees. The aspects of sexual harassment and organizational intervention within the organization were explored on a variety of multiple levels, including aggression, organizational justice, and corporate culture. This case study explores the complex dynamics of the intervention using an applied research approach.

CONTEXTS FROM THE LITERATURE

Historically, sexual harassment has been a known practice in male-dominated organizations spanning decades (Hersch, 2018). The literature on the subject provides a plethora of information on the impact that workplace incivility, such as harassment, bullying, insulting, or demeaning comments, and *quid pro quo* has on both the individual and organization. Patel argues that "98% of organizations have a sexual harassment policy in place, but it remains an issue" (Patel, 2018). The EEOC (2019) reported that 75% of women who are harassed at work go unreported. Policies are not enough to prevent sexual harassment from occurring. Walsh & Magley (2019) concur by stating, "when organizational tolerance for sexual harassment is high, policies, practices, and procedures convey an implicit and explicit acceptance of sexually harassing behaviors" (pg. 39). Women don't feel comfortable reporting harassment claims because they fear being fired and or viewed as victim (Patel, 2018). They don't trust that anything will happen when they report their claim, thus creating a recipe for absenteeism, low performance, and turnover. Annual training that ticks the box isn't sufficient to address harassment at the onset, nor does it remedy an environment where women do not feel comfortable to bring claims of sexual harassment forward. Implementing climate surveys early, continuously evaluating and monitoring the climate, conducting ongoing training and development within the organization, establishing a cadence by communicating zero tolerance for sexual harassment, by holding perpetrators accountable can help reduce incivility, harassment and allow women to feel comfortable in the workplace.

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