When the Process Fails:
Restoring Trust in a #MeToo Workplace

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Details of a sexual harassment investigation were shared with members of the community by the employee who initially filed the related complaint and were subsequently leaked to the local media. Such details are regarded as confidential personnel matters, and parties to an investigation are encouraged not to discuss details in order to ensure full and impartial fact gathering. With that said, parties to complaints of this nature are not obligated to hold details in confidence – largely because it is their personal story. The broad distribution of details led to workplace protests, expressions of distrust of leadership, impassioned calls for greater transparency in handling of sexual harassment complaints by Human Resources, and a demand for review of sanctions levied on parties found responsible for violating policies. Leadership responded by convening a task force to examine current policies, to research best practices in sexual harassment response and prevention, and to recommend a plan of action.

BACKGROUND

The #MeToo movement has changed the workplace landscape, bringing heightened attention to people and institutions that engage in, or enable through inaction, behaviors that breach ethical and legal standards, and create a climate that tolerates harassment. Stories of these breaches are widespread and span industries, and higher education institutions are no exception. As the scope of this problem has become more apparent, employees have increasingly demanded that employers act to eliminate harassment, and an unprecedented number of consumers have demanded the same from the companies they patronize.

This new landscape provides important leverage for Human Resource (HR) practitioners to influence organizational leadership toward higher standards and accountability. With this in mind, this case incorporates facts and circumstances from actual workplace scenarios reflecting vexing challenges that organizational leaders encounter when facing allegations of (perceived or actual) mishandling of sexual harassment in their organization. The hypothetical sexual harassment incident, itself, serves as the initiating incident, but is not central to the story. This case presents a comprehensive institutional response aimed at setting the underpinnings for building a culture of inclusion – free of harassment and discrimination. The conceptual framework developed by Pless and Maak (2004), which places organizational norms and values as central components, is applied.

The case illuminates the inherent complexities of handling sexual harassment complaints and explores leadership and organizational responses and actions. It illustrates how the activism and courage of some members of the workforce influenced these actions and how the task force engaged its charge from the president. The case examines the role of key stakeholders, the factors which drove the emotion-laden discourse, and outlines immediate and longer term organizational impacts. The case further examines specifically the role of HR practitioners in serving in the dual role as steward of an organization's legal compliance and as neutral investigators of sexual harassment complaints.

HISTORY AND CONTEXT

A newspaper article detailed an investigation of a complaint which found an administrator in violation of the organization's sexual harassment policy, and the resulting sanction of demotion with a substantial reduction in pay. Employees and students protested the sanction levied as being too lenient. The workplace climate quickly heated and emotions charged. Organization leaders were caught off guard by the reaction of the community, especially the apparent deep lack of trust in

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