FROM AWARENESS TO ACTION:
How to Stop Sexual Harassment Once & For All

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Thanks to viral campaigns, trending hashtags, and persistent press coverage, the issue of sexual harassment in the workplace has been put in the hot seat the past couple of years.

Organizations have stepped up to the plate—publicly addressing the issue head on in an effort to encourage others to do the same. From global walkouts protesting current policy (or lack thereof) to company-wide shut downs for proper harassment training, the resounding message of employees was loud and clear: We want change.

But change takes time, especially for behavior-based issues such as sexual harassment. This is precisely why it is and has been such a pervasive plague within workplace culture. Eradicating sexual harassment from the workplace requires a thorough understanding of where we are now and where we need to be, as well as copious amounts of exposure and practice. Let’s start with where we are now.
Where We Are Today
Defining Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment is illegal sexual conduct in the workplace.

It is a form of sexual discrimination and defined by Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 as, "unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature that interferes with work performance or creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment."

Some states and local municipalities also have expanded protections that include offensive comments regarding someone’s sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, transgender status, pregnancy, childcare, and related medical conditions.
The Cost of Sexual Harassment

33% of Americans believe their workplace fosters sexual harassment.

$22,500 per employee
The average damage per employee in lost productivity and employee turnover due to sexual harassment.

19.9%
Percentage at which companies with the highest incidences of sexual harassment underperform the U.S. stock market.

$160,000
Average cost to defend and settle a sexual harassment lawsuit.

80%
of women who experienced sexual harassment began a new job within 2 years.

23%
of executives report declines in morale and engagement due to sexual harassment.
Roadblocks to Preventing Sexual Harassment

The next step toward ending sexual harassment involves identifying current roadblocks: what’s getting in the way of solving the issue of sexual harassment and how do we address it?
It was found that the #1 reason victims don’t take action when they’ve been sexually harassed is because they worry they’ll lose their job or their income/tips. Other reasons include worrying:
• no one will believe them
• nothing will happen if they do file a report
• they’ll be blamed
• they’ll face social retaliation (humiliation and ostracism)
• they’ll face professional retaliation (damage to career and/or reputation)

A bystander is someone who witnesses another person being sexually harassed, knows it’s wrong, yet does not take action. In addition to fear of retaliation, a bystander’s lack of initiative may spur from two other reasons including:
• diffusion of responsibility (assuming someone else observing the situation will take action)
• lack of social influence (believing that, since no one else who observed has done anything, perhaps intervening isn’t the correct behavior).
Until recent years, many companies adhered to sexual harassment policies written in the 1980's. While the momentum for state mandates is accelerating, most states continue to leave decisions concerning sexual harassment in the hands of employers.

Of course, this only exacerbates the inconsistency as beliefs about what constitutes sexual harassment vary from person to person.

Despite a unifying theme of “zero-tolerance,” without state or federal policies to guide them, many organizations fail to define what behaviors are prohibited and how sexual harassment prevention rules will be enforced.

Finally, there’s the issue of ineffective company policy around handling sexual harassment complaints. Confusing filing processes and other bureaucratic hoops can lead to employees feeling like they’d rather endure or ignore the harassing behavior than go through the grueling process and paperwork of filing an official claim.
Roadblock #3: Costs & Logistics

While there's been a lot of progress in recent years addressing “zero-tolerance” at all levels, leadership is still faced with a quandary: Taking all employees, including senior level and above, off the job for 1-2 hours of training (in some states, every year) poses a huge cost and logistical issue to the company.

That being said, culture change starts at the top; so the question for today's leaders becomes: how do we make sure our training is effective and impactful enough to make up for this opportunity cost?

Additionally, the cost of NOT training employees can lead to millions of dollars in legal expenses, higher employee turnover, increased absences, decreased engagement, and reduced overall productivity.
Roadblock #4: Sexual Harassment Training Doesn’t Change Behavior

It’s no wonder sexual harassment training has yielded a bad rep—it hasn’t been effective (for the most part).

Most training programs in circulation do nothing to engage employees or push for behavior change. Instead, the focus is on minimizing legal implications and making sure companies don’t get sued for failing to deploy sexual harassment training.

Below are the most common reasons employees “tune out:”

Videos tend to be boring and full of legalese

Examples are dated, cheesy, or unrelatable

Instruction isn’t practical or easy to apply

Additionally, once training is deployed, there is often little to no follow-up and no link to the greater mission of building a workplace where everyone feels safe and respected.
Roadblock #5: Employee Resistance to Training

A Media Partners survey of nearly 150 customers found that the #1 challenge with Sexual Harassment Training was “Employees don’t want to take the training.”

In addition to all the reasons already listed, employee resistance may also have something to do with their current outlook on the issue. Perhaps it’s the fact that the topic of sexual harassment still holds a social taboo, or that employees have a cynical outlook on whether or not anything will actually change.

In either case, it’s imperative organizations work to change the perception around sexual harassment prevention training so it’s seen, not as the company’s way of “paying lip service” to the issue, but as an ongoing, top-down organizational commitment to ending inappropriate behavior and sexual harassment, in all its forms.

Additionally, organizations should strive to instill confidence within employees that the right steps will be taken should sexual harassment present itself.
As is often the case when enterprises do not respond quickly enough to a social issue, state governments may step in. For sexual harassment, an increasing number of states are strongly recommending sexual harassment prevention training. Others, such as California, New York, Connecticut and others, are mandating training. Still more states have laws pending. Even cities, such as New York City, have enacted legislation. It is highly likely that more states will adopt sexual harassment prevention mandates over the next several years, and that fines for non-compliance will be levied and/or increased.

**GOVERNMENTS STEP IN**

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**COMPLIANCE BECOMES A TOP PRIORITY**

Staying on top of ever-expanding state and federal sexual harassment prevention legislation has become a top priority for organizations seeking to ensure their procedures, policies and training are in compliance.

**BEING PROACTIVE**

And as for organizations not in compliance states, being proactive and enacting voluntary compliance is of the utmost importance.
Where We Need to Go

In order to address the roadblocks listed above, we need to attack three different areas: the organizational level, the managerial level, and the employee level.
How Employees Can Take Action

You often hear the phrase “it takes a village” in the context of raising children. However, the same philosophy can be applied to successfully running a company. Employees are the bedrock of your organization—they drive progress, embody company culture, and keep the wheels of productivity turning. So when it comes to driving successful change initiatives, employee buy-in is essential. Without it, the organization is fighting a losing battle.

Below are a few things employees can do to support their organization’s sexual harassment prevention initiatives. Have managers share this list with their employees!

SEXUAL HARASSMENT PREVENTION: WHAT EMPLOYEES CAN DO

Flip Your Perspective on Sexual Harassment Training
Instead of adopting a negative attitude around ineffective sexual harassment prevention training of the past, look at it for what it is today: an opportunity to be part of real change within your organization. A positive outlook on any initiative is integral in true culture change.

Steer Clear of Inappropriate Behaviors
Filter your words, keep your hands to yourself, and treat others how you’d like to be treated. Bottom line: if there’s any doubt that you should be doing it, don’t.

Speak Up: Be an Upstander
Here’s the golden rule for being an upstander: “If you see something, say something.” When you witness someone being harassed, don’t ignore it — provide moral support! Direct them to a manager or HR if they don’t know what to do. If the person seems frazzled or afraid, reassure them with a gentle reminder that the perpetrator’s behavior is NOT okay. Being an upstander empowers others around you to do the same.

Practice Zero-Tolerance
Practicing zero-tolerance means that all forms of inappropriate behavior, especially those that are sexual in nature, will not be tolerated in the workplace. These include anything from sexual innuendos to risqué jokes — even those intended for humor, not harm. However, when you witness these kinds of behaviors, it’s important to step in. Issue a gentle but sincere reminder that work is not the time or place for those topics. Doing so sets the standard for those around you, and turns the blanket-statement of “zero-tolerance” into tangible action.
How Managers Can Take Action

Employees look to leadership to set an example, yet, year after year, a majority of sexual harassment charges are filed against these senior positions. It was recently found that in white collar jobs, 72% of women who reported being harassed, were harassed by someone more senior in their careers. Even worse, many organizations either have no plan or do the bare-minimum when it comes to providing sexual harassment prevention training for managers.

In order to successfully make progress toward eradicating sexual harassment from the workplace, managers must be willing to put in the work. Doing so takes a degree of humility, a dash of self-awareness, and a whole lot of patience (especially when trying to change ingrained behaviors and thought patterns). However, the payoff is the unyielding support of the people as they follow suit.

Here are a few things managers can do to lead successful sexual harassment prevention initiatives. Distribute this list to all those in management or leadership positions within your organization.

SEXUAL HARASSMENT PREVENTION: WHAT MANAGERS CAN DO

Lead by Example

In the context of sexual harassment prevention, leading by example is much more than practicing what you preach. It’s about taking actionable measures towards a culture of prevention.

Think of a teacher — the best ones spend time outside of class studying the curriculum, planning their lessons, and making sure they have enough resources to help their students. When faced with disruptive behavior, the most respectable teachers will unemotionally excuse the student from the room or situation, thereby enforcing that inappropriate conduct will not be tolerated in the classroom. This combination of personal preparation and discipline ensures both their success as a teacher and the success of their pupils.

As a manager, your success is your team’s success. Therefore, leadership must put in the work to foster a respectful environment that sets their people up to succeed.
FROM AWARENESS TO ACTION: HOW TO STOP SEXUAL HARASSMENT ONCE & FOR ALL

Inspire an Environment of Upstanders
As we learned earlier, victims and witnesses of sexual harassment who fail to speak up, do so out of fear that their supervisors may retaliate. Managers must therefore go the extra mile to ensure their people feel comfortable coming to them in times of crises.

To empower employees to speak up:

- Destigmatize the conversation around sexual harassment — doing so demonstrates that your employees can feel safe coming to you.
- Raise awareness with mandatory employee training to keep the issue top of mind.
- Make yourself available to employees so they feel comfortable coming to you, should an issue arise.

Below are a few examples of what that environment may look like:

- A constant awareness of certain behavioral patterns that could develop into illegal conduct (more on this later).
- Not tolerating inappropriate conversations or behaviors.
- Building a sense of trust between management and employees.
- Being willing to delve into issues and situations that may be uncomfortable.
- Emphasizing the importance of sexual harassment prevention training.

FOR EXAMPLE
If an employee jokingly makes an offensive comment during a meeting, shut it down immediately by saying something like;

“Hey—I know you’re joking, but that might make some folks uncomfortable, so let’s not joke like that at work.”
Stop Inappropriate Conduct Before it Becomes Illegal

Sometimes people don’t realize their actions negatively impact others. For this reason, it’s crucial managers learn basic behavioral guidelines that will help them identify commonly misconstrued behavior patterns. The ability to recognize these patterns allows managers to put a stop to the first signs of harassing behavior before it becomes full-blown illegal conduct.

Here are a few examples of behaviors that managers should pay attention to:

- An employee voices that a co-worker consistently jokes around about taking her on a date.
- An employee consistently has “a little too much to drink” at team happy hours and spews out comments that make the whole team cringe.
- An employee relentlessly gives unsolicited parenting tips to a pregnant coworker.

Take all reports seriously

Sexual harassment is a complicated issue. A manager’s job is to ensure every report brought to your attention is given thorough and proper consideration.

Here are a few ways to do so:

- Make employees feel heard by taking the time to hear them out. Provide a safe space by listening to their entire story, beginning to end.
- Don’t judge. Instead, managers should clarify their understanding of the employee’s story by asking follow-up questions, and then immediately report their findings to their manager and/or HR.
- Know the protocol for handling a sexual harassment complaint and follow it.
- Protect from retaliation anyone who files a complaint (this includes upstanders or anyone who cooperates in an investigation).
How Organizations Can Take Action

Everyone deserves to work in an environment where they feel safe, respected, and engaged. Below are specific actions organizations can take to sustain a culture of respect and accountability. Share this list with your leadership, HR, Learning & Development, and Compliance departments.

SEXUAL HARASSMENT PREVENTION: WHAT ORGANIZATIONS CAN DO

**Train Everyone**

The risks of not training are too high to ignore. But there are ways to mitigate them. Deploying company-wide training has the potential to increase legal defenses available to your organization if sued under Title VII. Training also ensures compliance as states continue to require and mandate training. Additionally, the negative impact on your business—from stock under performance and lower profitability to reduced productivity and higher turnover—is minimized by smart sexual harassment prevention policies, procedures, training and reinforcement.

Here’s some tips for selecting a training program:

- If you’re under a government mandate, select training that is backed by a compliance guarantee to ensure your training is constantly updated to meet ever-evolving state mandates.
- Whether you’re mandated to train or not, select a program that helps build a culture of respect and enjoy the benefits of a more engaged and productive workplace.

**Pay Extra Attention to Current Managers**

Whether you’re dealing with clueless managers who don’t realize their behavior is perceived negatively or those who are ill-equipped when faced with sexual harassment claims, effective training can help get everyone on the same page.

Here are three must-haves for your next training program:

- Equip managers with a game plan detailing what exactly to do when they see, experience, or hear about sexual harassment.
- Give managers proper instructions on the Do’s and Don’ts of handling a sexual harassment complaint.
Train the Next Generation of Managers
Some leaders are born, some leaders are made, but the best leaders are (you guessed it) trained. In order to eradicate pervasive issues such as sexual harassment once and for all, organizations can’t rely on current managers alone... They need to think one step ahead!

Invest in the future of the organization by training people at all levels—from entry level to executives. Companies may even consider a program for freelancers, contract workers, or temporary agencies who frequently interact with others in the workplace. By being proactive about introducing sexual harassment prevention early on, organizations can exponentially increase the probability of nipping sexual harassment in the bud.

Follow Up on Company-Wide Training Initiatives
Organizations must veer away from check-the-box training and commit to programs that are effective, impactful, and focused on behavior change. Most importantly, companies must institute consistent follow up after completion. Doing so keeps people accountable, thereby forcing the changes to stick. Select a program that offers follow-up tools or refresher training to reinforce the initial learning and show employees you’re serious about cultivating a respectful environment that is free of harassment.
Change is Possible

By addressing sexual harassment at the employee, manager, and organizational levels, the opportunity for change is boundless.

Yet it’s important to bear in mind that, through each step of the journey, change is a collective effort requiring all hands on deck. Hopefully, utilizing some of these tools will move you one step closer to a lasting culture of respect.
About This Book

*From Awareness to Action: How to Stop Sexual Harassment Once & For All* features information curated and developed by Media Partners. Its goal is to equip people at all levels of the organization with facts and strategies that can lead to true behavior change and a culture of respect.

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About Media Partners

Media Partners addresses the most critical people skills issues to ensure employees feel respected, safe and engaged in their work environment. Our award-winning training content helps organizations build better workplaces, resulting in improved employee retention, productivity, and performance. Our programs include well-known titles such as: *Once & For All: Stopping Sexual Harassment at Work* and *How Was Your Day? Getting Real about Bias, Inclusion, Harassment and Bullying*.

We measure our programs’ positive impact on behavior and the work environment through detailed data analytics that help organizations navigate both compliance requirements and culture change.

Founded in 1993 and headquartered in Bellevue, WA, Media Partners content is embraced by virtually every industry, in large and small organizations, and by corporations, government agencies, and non-profits.

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