Harassment in the Workplace
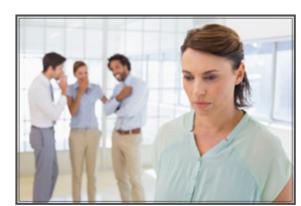
Harvey Weinstein, Matt Lauer, Charlie Rose, Steve Wynn, John Conyers, Wayne Pacelle….some of the names you may recognize and others you may not. All have been accused of sexual harassment over the last few months.

2017 and the #MeToo movement brought accusations of sexual harassment to the forefront of our consciousness, and the stories have continued into 2018.

Harassment in the workplace impacts employee morale, safety, productivity and retention, and the increased attention on the subject may mean behavior that previously was dismissed, ignored or downplayed carries more risk now than it did a few months ago. Harassment is a risk to organizational profits and reputation that must be proactively addressed.

A December 2017 CareerBuilder survey of 809 full-time workers across industries in the U.S. found that 72% of workers who had been sexually harassed at work did not report it; and 54% did not confront their harasser. While victims are becoming more vocal, there are likely still many untold stories in organizations across the country and across industries.

Harassment negatively impacts employees' ability to focus and their sense of security at work.

The CareerBuilder survey provides evidence that organizations need to do a better job of:
- Educating employees regarding what behavior is okay at work
- Providing tools so victims and observers know what to do when they experience or observe harassment

POLICY CHANGES

If your organization has not reviewed its anti-harassment policy recently, this is a great time to do so. When reviewing your policy, consider the following items:

Review and Update Entire Policy. While the #metoo movement has been getting a lot of press exposing the impact of sexual harassment, do not forget about harassing behaviors based on race, ethnicity and religion. Each one of these areas provides potential exposure to your organization and impacts the workplace culture and employee morale.

Limit Technical Jargon. While you might feel safe copying and pasting information from the EEOC website to include in your policy or training, that language does not resonate with most employees. Use language within your policy that resonates with your organization's culture.

Reasons for Not Reporting Harassment

40% Fearful of being considered a troublemaker

22% Worried about a "he said/she said" situation

18% Fearful of losing job

Source: CareerBuilder 2017 Survey

Explain Prohibited Behavior. Many times, people do not realize their behavior creates a hostile work environment that is 'severe or pervasive'. They are not aware of the impact of their actions or words. Giving examples of behaviors that are unacceptable can help create a mutual understanding across the organization and set your organization's expectations. Begin a section with: "The following behaviors are unacceptable and therefore prohibited, even if they are not unlawful in and of themselves."

Even if something is not illegal, it does not mean that you want it in the workplace. Explain these situations to help shape the workplace environment you want moving forward.

Explain Sexual Harassment. This includes quid pro quo and creating a hostile work environment. Some employees may not realize that sexual jokes, inappropriate comments regarding pregnancy, and objectifying either men or women (positively or negatively) can create a hostile work environment. Employees need to understand these scenarios.

Harassment Can Happen at All Levels. Employers are liable for the behavior of Board members, CEOs and senior leaders, managers, employees, vendors and customers. Ensure your organization takes steps to investigate and resolve any complaints from any of these parties.

TRAINING

While policies are helpful, employees typically do not memorize employee handbooks or actively read through them each year. Organizations need to find other ways to share their behavioral expectations and keep information from getting stale. A thoughtful training strategy that is visibly supported by senior leadership can help ensure your organizational culture remains free from harassment of all types.

Online training helps provide a shared understanding of basic information across all groups in an organization and can be cost effective and efficient. However, it lacks the interpersonal interaction that can improve understanding and acceptance.

In-person training addresses the basics and can help identify knowledge gaps. It allows the facilitator to encourage dialogue between participants, to talk through different scenarios and build awareness.

Through each of these training avenues, organizations can create an environment where employees understand expectations and know what to do when they experience or see harassment in the workplace.

SUMMARY

Harassment is not a new thing. However, in the midst of deadlines and projects, even the most well intentioned leaders can forget about the importance of conducting ongoing harassment prevention training for all people who impact our business.

There are a number of resources available to help organizations to improve awareness and the overall organizational culture when it comes to harassment prevention.

If you would like assistance in updating your harassment prevention policy, or more information about Foundations Consulting's online and in-person harassment prevention training, please contact Beth Ostrem or Heather Binger.

Sources: CareerBuilder (Jan. 18, 2018) "New CareerBuilder Survey Finds 72% of Workers Who Experience Sexual Harassment at Work Do Not Report It" PRNewsire. Segal, J. (Dec. 4, 2017) "5 Effective Ways to Upgrade Your Anti-Harassment Policy" SHRM.

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