

PUBLICATION

Preventing the Unintended Consequences of #MeToo

December 14, 2018

Two words: Me Too. This hashtag has come to represent so much more than "it also happened to me." The #MeToo movement is a calling, an indictment of years of silence, inequality and mistreatment. It is an intense spotlight on a problem that was overlooked, ignored and hidden for so long. Women are stepping forward in unprecedented numbers and relaying stories of past harassment, abuse and assault. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission recently reported that "due to the heightened demand of the #MeToo movement," the number of sexual harassment charges increased in FY2018 for the first time in nearly a decade. The #MeToo movement has raised awareness certainly, but the question remains as to how it will impact the relationships, communications and interactions between men and women, particularly in the workplace.

Research shows that genuine relationships, particularly [sponsorships](#), are crucial for advancement and career success. Many men report they have become paralyzed and fearful of their interactions with women at work, concerned that one unjust accusation or misunderstood comment could end their careers. A [survey](#) commissioned by Sheryl Sandberg's Lean In Initiative found that number of male managers who are uncomfortable mentoring women has tripled since the #MeToo movement started in October 2017. Women are reportedly being deprived of collaboration, interface and interaction that could lead to career growth and opportunities. Some corporate CEOs are reluctant to have meetings alone with a female colleague and companies are limiting business travel by gender. Beyond career impacts, there is also a question about the effect on the workplace environment in general. An [article](#) in the *Chicago Tribune* addresses how the #MeToo movement has a "chilling effect on workplace camaraderie."

According to the 2018 Society of Resource Managers (SHRM) survey, "Harassment-Free Workplace Series: The Executive View," 11 percent of executives reported "extreme reactions" in their behavioral changes at work to avoid the perception of sexual harassment. These extreme reactions cited include, "Don't talk to women."; "Scared to say anything."; "[Avoid] any indirect or direct contact with others, any conversation one-on-one, asking permission to enter into 3 foot personal space and NEVER closer than 3 foot of another." The survey also noted that six percent of executives responded that they've changed policies and/or provided new training. One executive noted following policy change to mentoring programs, "Senior – Junior work teams of only two individuals – ended. Working after hours in the office is not allowed for groups of less than 3 employees and must include a manager."

Is this reaction, or perhaps overreaction, a realistic protective stance or a false narrative? Do men have a legitimate fear of false accusations, and what, if anything, should HR departments do about it? [Johnny Taylor](#), CEO of SHRM, applauds efforts employers have made in light of the #MeToo movement but warns of overreaction. "As a cultural change metric in such a short time, having a third of executives report changed behavior is significant," Mr. Taylor said. "Yet, we can't let the pendulum swing too far. Organizations must be careful not to create a culture of 'guilty until proven innocent' and we cannot tolerate other unintended consequences."

So what should employers do to address the issues raised by the #MeToo movement?

- First, continue to focus on increasing awareness, dialogue, accountability and culture.

- It is important to not just have written anti-harassment policies, but also well-defined, communicated guidelines regarding culture, conduct and reporting.
- Conducting anti-harassment and subconscious bias training for employees, at all levels, using a legitimate resource person is essential to communicate expectations and answer crucial questions.
- Assure employees that the organization will take claims seriously and that investigations will not be "witch hunts," but rather genuine, thorough inquiries into issues.

Like any cultural shift, change comes slowly and often with bumps in the road. While there may be some who are hesitant to sponsor or mentor women as a result of the #MeToo movement, the core message of the movement has brought an important issue front and center. If employers are proactive, #MeToo is the beginning of a dialogue, a welcomed opportunity to increase communication and connection among employees, and the catalyst to create a safe, welcoming, productive environment for all.