

QUARTZ *at* WORK

What to do when an employee reports sexual harassment

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We know from the [2016 EEOC report on harassment in the workplace](#) and other studies that between 25% and 85% of women, and between [11% and 16%](#) of men, say that they have experienced sexual harassment.

That means that, if you're a manager, it's very likely that you'll encounter a sexual harassment situation at some point in your career. You may learn about it anecdotally, or it might arrive at your desk as a formal report or notification from HR or elsewhere.

How you react can determine whether you're able to build open teams that encourage everyone to have a voice. Here are important steps you should take:

Know the process. It is your responsibility to know your organizational policies, protocols, and investigatory processes as well as what you would need to do. If these procedures are unclear, you

should take initiative now to make changes to clarify them. Keep in mind that multiple report pathways and strict protocols are crucial.

Avoid the allure of denial. Learn to take stories about sexual harassment in your organization seriously. Be careful about snap assessments that a certain story or comment is “not a big deal,” or not “worthy” of being further investigated.

Look for your own blind spots as well as those of employees. For example, leaders must not allow their need or reverence for the valuable expertise of a longtime employee to blind them to the employee’s problematic traits or abusive behavior. Don’t overlook behaviors that subvert team psychological safety or undermine strong organizational culture because you value someone’s professional achievements.

Acknowledge the risk of speaking up. Be sure you convey that you understand how emotionally and professionally risky it is for someone to step forward and speak up about these matters. Practice empathic listening. Affirm the courage it takes to speak up, while avoiding taking sides.

Avoid judgment. Remember that all parties in an incident deserve to be heard without a rush to judgment in any direction.

Make it clear that an investigation will need to be conducted—one that is prompt, confidential, thorough, independent, and fair.

Proactively avoid retaliation situations. Of the 30% of sexual harassment victims who do report it, up to 75% experience retaliation, according to an EEOC report. Put protocols and systems in place to prevent and detect retaliation. When employees fear retaliation, they are understandably far less likely to speak about it.

Be aware of the internal psychological tensions that arise when inappropriate behaviors occur—whether you are the person feeling harassed, a bystander, a manager receiving a report or the person accused of harassing another. Each party often experiences an inner psychological negotiation between one’s cognitive impulses (“I think I should say or do something to stop this behavior”) and one’s emotional responses (“I feel afraid, embarrassed, numb, frozen, angry, etc.”) This internal dialogue is often accompanied by the fight-flight-freeze stress responses that stop us from thinking clearly or responding effectively when we feel threat or discomfort. The key is to be prepared by practicing scenarios to identify and give voice to these inner feelings and thoughts, while rehearsing effective responses in role plays.

Establish ongoing rather than one-time trainings. The most effective training programs concentrate on prevention. Examine your trainings to assess whether they are working. The 2016 (EEOC) report showed that many traditional trainings have not been effective or sufficient. Bystander and other interactive/experiential skill-based approaches may offer more efficacy. Also, it is necessary to identify goals, gather data, measure results, and improve your protocols based on the results.

Be sure to follow up. It is imperative that leaders follow up and stay engaged, rather than just “checking a box” to give the appearance of action. Managers must be rewarded for excellence in their effectiveness in dealing with sexual harassment behaviors and there must be concrete consequences for managers who drop the ball.

Business leaders have an extraordinary opportunity to create lasting change that builds on the momentum of the #MeToo movement. Leaders can positively affect the narrative through the roles they play and the strategic choices they make to create an inclusive culture of respect, trust, and open dialogue in their organizations.

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