

Go Beyond “Best Practices” – Fixing Harassment and Adding Respect to your Culture

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2018 promises to be a year of accusations and resignations – and as organizational leaders we need to examine how we got here, what we should do now, and what similar challenges are on the horizon once we work through these immediate issues.

You may think we are going through a “perfect storm” of harassment in the workplace, but I feel it is bigger than that. After a “Perfect Storm” passes, the world returns to a normal state. This current wave of harassment accusation appears to be a fundamental climate change in how our culture handles power and ethics. You have 2 choices - be reactive and live in fear of it happening to you, or be proactive and get ahead of it.

There is no easy fix, and many of the “best practices” of the future are now “dead batteries” – they never really worked well, and now they have even lost more effectiveness. This is an opportunity for you to evaluate your organizational strategy for dealing with harassment in all forms – Sexual, Quid pro Quo, Toxic Environment and Bullying. Each of these are based on power, and all reduce your organization’s productivity and increase your legal risk.

As a risk management and human resources expert, I always look to prevent litigation and challenging episodes for my clients, and to help build positive, high performing anticipatory cultures that will thrive in the future.

Here are some basic steps to consider in strengthening your policies and practices:

- **Remember, It’s all about Power.** Power is often at the heart of harassment and sexual abuse. Power comes in many forms – from the position or title, from relationships, from persuasion, etc. Power benefits from personal maturity – Plato described the ideal leader as a “Philosopher King” who was a servant of his people. Training should cover power in all it’s forms, and how to best handle power when it is misapplied.
- **Diversity and Inclusion helps.** Fostering a business culture that respects human dignity is key to creating sustainable business results. If you promote civility and respect you will engender not only loyalty and hard work, but also an enviable culture that becomes part of your message to the public and your marketplace. Training should include a foundation of Diversity and Inclusion.
- **Humans are complex** – don’t treat this as a simple exercise. The issue of hidden bias, implicit bias, confirmation bias, and other psychological factors make us all very complex thinkers. By realizing the “hard wired” filters that we all work with, we can craft more careful messages and get better traction for behavior change.
- **Do a cultural audit** – You can use modern engagement metrics, or hire outside experts to do a cultural audit. Get a good “read” on your organizational culture. The Audit process will give you vital information to shape more individualized training, and you should consider other tools that may be necessary to improve reporting, prevention

and compliance. Training should focus on advanced communication theory and measuring “soft skills”.

- **Build trust in Human Resources.** I predict that with this current climate of retribution, complaints will initially go up as there is a significant volume of harassing activity that has not been reported. Our national culture of retaliation against whistleblowers needs to be examined and remedied, and Human Resources needs to be seen as a trusted ally. While whispers and rumors are often not reliable, they can alert an employer to look further. Does your HR staff have good business rapport with your employees? Is there a choice of individuals, both male and female, to whom complaints can be directed?
- **Have high standards for your HR professionals.** Hiring and promoting well rounded, empathetic and smart HR professionals is invaluable in maintaining solid trust with your employees. Pay attention to their backgrounds, and recognize the certifications that are available that signal competence in the HR body of knowledge.
- **Improve your training, both in quality and quantity.** Existing training materials are mostly legal compliance language, attempting to change behaviors with threats and using fear tactics. Simply put, they don’t change long-term behaviors. Plan ongoing “Respect in the Workplace” training (the rule of thumb is every two years) and make it interactive and engaging, and mandatory. Supervisors have additional responsibilities, so there can be some benefit in training them separately. Don’t make the training boring or too long, and look at new delivery technologies and techniques that can give it traction.
- **Pay attention to your metrics.** Organizational culture varies by department, and warning signs about toxic work environment may already be found in your HR metrics. Look for turnover of high performing people by department – if a supervisor isn’t keeping the “good ones”, look deeper for the reasons.

So, why pay so much attention to this? There are pivotal moments in history where we Americans have examined our attitudes towards fundamental things – civil rights, sexuality, equal pay, and other key components of life in a diverse country. This surge in harassment accusations is another equally pivotal moment, and now we are facing the crucible of confronting the daily revelations of past poor choices and offensive behaviors.

Let me make it more personal. Your brand reputation – that priceless, intangible perception that takes years to build - can be lost in an instant and communicated everywhere in social media. Imagine the intangible costs to the Weinstein Company or NBC or Fox News, then swap in the name of your organization and imagine your personal losses.

This “climate change” is real, and just beginning. I look at this active shift of power in organizations as the time for leaders to take stock of their systems and step up their game. Leaders should see the changing social landscape as a time to reinforce their commitment to a sustainable high performing culture, and handle harassment, diversity and inclusion as the foundational building blocks that they are. It’s not being “trendy” - it is smart business for all of us.

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Karl Ahlrichs has broad experience in senior level problem solving, with proven skills in handling complex organizational issues with uncommon sense. These issues often include training and coaching work on power and harassment avoidance. Karl is a national speaker and author, and is often quoted in the local and national media.

Karl joined Gregory & Appel, an Indianapolis-based service firm, after serving as a founding partner of ExactHire, a human resources services firm. Prior experience was as a Senior Consultant for Professional Staff Management, and earlier he was in Business Development in the Indianapolis office of Marsh & McLennan, and Vice President of Right Management Consultants. At those firms, his clients included Roche Diagnostics, Boeing, Apple Computer, Wellpoint, and Frito Lay.

Karl facilitates an invitation-only roundtable for CFOs. For more than a decade he was the Program Chair for the Indiana Society for Human Resources Management annual conference. He is a member of SHRM, the American Society of Training and Development, and the Association for Psychological Type. He is president of the Indiana Chapter of the National Speaker's Association.

Karl has been named the SHRM Human Resource Professional of the Year for the State of Indiana. He has presented at the National SHRM Conference for 20 consecutive years, and holds the Senior Certified Professional (SHRM-SCP) and Senior Professional Human Resources (SPHR) certification.

Karl's experience is perfectly suited to times of great organizational change. He has decades of strategic consulting to all industries, using risk management and good organizational development theories to bypass "best practices" and move directly to "next practices".