Commentary

Two years on: The impact of #MeToo

#MeToo was (and still is) a movement to stop behaviors that have been illegal since the 1960s.

BY STEPHEN M. PASKOFF

We're nearing the two-year anniversary of the explosion of **#MeToo**, a hashtag that has come to symbolize the struggle of women to be treated with respect and equality in the workplace.

A **recent survey** indicates that the results of the movement are mixed: On the plus side, women report a lessening of outright sexual harassment. On the other hand, the survey concluded, there has been an increase of what's known as "gender hostility"—more subtle forms of discrimination against people of given gender (usually women).

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Further, a **separate study** indicates that more men avoid working one-on-one with female coworkers and are reluctant to hire women for a job that might require them to be alone together (such as business travel).

Remember, however, that #MeToo was (and still is) a movement that is trying to stop behaviors that have been illegal since the 1960s. But as the results show, simply trying to stop illegal behaviors is not enough to truly minimize the problems.

Rather, you get what we've seen with #MeToo— a lessening of outright illegal acts but an increase of uncivil or exclusionary behavior. Often when overtly illegal behaviors arise, an organization's leaders leap into action and commit to doing anything necessary to stop it.

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Taking action to eliminate the behaviors that pose the highest risk—the banter, jokes, propositions, etc., that violate the law—is an absolute must. But it's not enough.

If the leaders' and the organizational focus is too narrow, if they fail to see the broader business implications of the full range of unacceptable behaviors—not just those that are illegal—you get grudging acceptance at best. For #MeToo, that grudging acceptance has vented itself in ways that are detrimental to the business, such as gender hostility and women being excluded from jobs or tasks because of their gender.

What's an organization to do?

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is the very minimum they can do to avoid legal trouble.

The mindset they should have instead is to think about what will generate the best results and allow them to attract and retain the best talent. That takes a workplace environment of trust and respect, where everyone knows that they can contribute to their fullest. More specifically, that includes the vision of #MeToo: having a workplace where women and men are treated as co-equal colleagues.

That's why I see #MeToo and its range of consequences as a reminder for leaders that it is their job to keep everyone focused on what's best for the business. And what's best for any business is workplace civility—having an organizational environment where behavior includes rather than excludes, one that makes people feel safe and comfortable rather than bullied or harassed, where every employee knows they can contribute fully and speak up about issues, where managers have the knowledge and skill to deal with issues openly rather than let ill feelings fester.

Developing a civil, **inclusive workplace** should be treated as a key business issue, just like profits or safety or benefits. Every employee at every level needs to really understand and appreciate the business consequences of positive and negative behaviors. That is the only impetus that will get them to examine their own and others' behavior and make changes.

To make workplace civility a reality, organizations must involve everyone. The responsibility for building a civil workplace cannot reside with HR or with leadership alone. Every single employee has the ability to shape the workplace environment.

Changes like this happen through ongoing (not one-time) education, and regular discussions integrated into everyday work—led by supervisors, managers, and executives—about what is acceptable and not acceptable in the workplace.

Risks and rewards

We've all seen the headlines about lawsuits being filed against men accused of unwanted, inappropriate and/or illegal behavior towards women. So it's clear that failing to **create a work environment** where women can be comfortable and fulfill their professional goals poses very real legal risks to an organization.

Equally important, but often overlooked, are all the other negative consequences: the impact to the organization's reputation, the harm to the organization's ability to attract and retain the best talent who deliver the best results. We are in an age where potential employees and investors—and society as a whole—are judging organizations based on social criteria not just dollars and cents.

In that sense, #MeToo and how women are treated has become as important as, say, an organization's environmental impact and its contributions to worthy causes in the community. The good news is that taking action to create a safer, more inclusive workplace for women will benefit everyone in the organization and lead to better business outcomes.

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