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An Open Letter to CEOs and Boards of Directors

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Dear Chief Executives and Boards of Directors,

Many of you have likely been surprised over the past several months to learn the extent to which sexual harassment is a pervasive problem that impacts workplaces in every industry. Some of you may have seen an uptick in harassment complaints at your company or news reports that could have been about your team.

You might have even gone so far as to wonder how a similar circumstance might play out in your organization.

April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month — and the time of year many companies work on their annual reviews and employee engagement surveys. We wanted to provide you with information, best practices and a few additional survey questions to consider to foster a harassment-free workplace and guard your company's reputation from becoming the next headline.

The Problem is Pervasive

Ending this problem requires an honest accounting of just how widespread it is. According to the RALIANCE/Stop Street Harassment 2018 national survey, [60 percent](#) of women say they have experienced unwanted sexual attention, sexual coercion, or sexist comments in the workplace. A National Sexual Violence Resource Center/Creative Coalition study conducted with USA TODAY found, in some industries, [more than nine in 10](#) women say they have been sexually harassed. The EEOC stated in their 2016 Workplace Harassment report that upwards of [85 percent](#) of people who experience sexual harassment never file a formal legal charge, and approximately 70 percent of employees never even complain internally.

Best Practices

Best-in-class companies foster an organizational culture where respect and civility are promoted and harassment is swiftly and proportionally addressed, and they communicate and model a consistent commitment to that goal. It is essential that organizations move from a focus on targets, harassers, and legal compliance to one where all employees, regardless of position, are empowered to change their workplace culture.

Model companies have a stated policy against harassment that sets forth examples of behaviors that will not be accepted in the workplace and the procedures to follow in reporting and responding to harassment. Their processes also include frequent communication to employees regarding how to

Ending Sexual Violence in One Generation.

report experienced or observed harassment, as well as encourage lower level supervisors and middle managers to quickly address problems. They ensure workplace responses are prompt, objective, and thorough, and that disciplinary actions are proportional to the problematic events. Such processes ensure mechanisms are in place throughout the organization to hold employees responsible for their actions and remind staff that “zero tolerance” does not equate to an automatic dismissal, a misperception which can be a barrier to employees reporting problems.

Surveying the Environment

Talk to your HR team about your employee engagement surveys. As more organizations leverage surveys to assess workplace harassment, it is important to ensure questions are framed with minimal interpretation. If a survey contains questions such as “Have you been sexually harassed in the last year”, it assumes that the person understands sexual harassment, and the respondent is willing to admit that they have experienced such behavior. Survey questions should be framed to ask about specific behaviors, such as “Has someone made comments on your appearance in a sexual way while in the office?” or “Have you been touched in a way that made you feel uncomfortable in the office?”

Ensure the format is anonymous and confidential. Studies have shown surveys delivered in a format that allows the participants to remain anonymous do actually provide more accurate results, particularly about these kinds of experiences. When surveys are mandatory and people need to sign in and be identified in any way, it will clearly impact the results.

Risk Factors

Sexual harassment can impact employees no matter where they work, but certain environmental or organizational conditions can increase the likelihood of harassment. Look with a critical eye at your own organization for the following risk factors: lack of diversity in the workplace and/or leadership, workforces with young employees, isolated workspaces, cultural and language differences in the workplace, workplaces that rely on customer service or client satisfaction, workplace cultures that tolerate or encourage alcohol consumption, or workplaces with significant power disparities.

There is a clear business case for preventing sexual harassment. As CEO and a member of the Board, you must not only take into account the direct financial costs associated with sexual harassment — including legal action — but recognize that the productivity, well-being and job satisfaction of all employees is threatened by demoralizing atmosphere created when staff experience and witness it. Engaging outside help to review policies and coach leadership about impacting behaviors in the workplace is a wise investment in promoting a healthy work environment and limiting the risk of sexual harassment and misconduct going unaddressed.

Sincerely,

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RALIANCE, Huntbridge, and Kindall Evolve have teamed up to provide training, tools and consulting to help companies working to strengthen their sexual harassment policies and procedures.