



U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission

PRESS RELEASE

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Holistic Approach Needed to Change Workplace Culture To Prevent Harassment, Experts Tell EEOC

WASHINGTON - Employers can take concrete steps to change their workplace cultures to prevent harassment, experts told the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) at a public meeting today entitled "Revamping Workplace Culture to Prevent Harassment," held at agency headquarters in Washington, D.C. One year after the #MeToo movement went viral, the Commission heard leaders describe various approaches that aim to prevent harassment and give employers and employees skills needed to respond when they experience or observe harassing behavior.

The EEOC also released [final fiscal year 2018 data](#) highlighting its ramped-up efforts to combat and prevent workplace harassment. EEOC reported a 13.6 percent increase in sexual harassment charges and a 50 percent increase in lawsuits filed alleging sexual harassment. Hits on the EEOC's sexual harassment webpage doubled since the start of the #MeToo movement one year ago. In addition, as an outgrowth of the [Report of the Co-Chairs of the EEOC's Select Task Force on the Study of Harassment in the Workplace](#), the EEOC's [Respectful Workplaces Training Program](#) that teaches the skills to foster respectful interactions, reached more than 9,800 employees and employers across the country.

"Leadership and accountability set the tone and the expectation that harassment will not be tolerated in a workplace," said Victoria A. Lipnic, Acting Chair. "Over the past year, we have seen far too many examples of significant gaps in both areas. Our witnesses today stressed how both leadership and accountability must also be driven throughout an organization from the line employees, to the supervisors, to the CEO, and to the Board."

"Today's testimony underscores that to really tackle the problem of workplace harassment, we need to change workplace culture, hold people accountable, and have the right policies, procedures, and training," said Commissioner Chai R. Feldblum, Co-Chair of the EEOC's Select Task Force on the Study of Harassment in the Workplace. "No one element, alone, will suffice. Instead, it takes a holistic effort that must start at the top with strong and committed leadership."

"I am grateful to the witnesses for their insights at today's Commission meeting on concrete solutions to the problem of workplace harassment in all its forms - whether based on race, national origin, color, sex, disability, age, religion or genetic information," said EEOC Commissioner Charlotte Burrows. "I look forward to working with my colleagues in the actions I know will follow."

The witnesses at today's Commission meeting focused on innovative training approaches, leadership, and accountability as components of holistic solutions to addressing harassment. Veronica Girón, a janitor and leader in the Ya Basta Campaign, and Alejandra Valles, the Secretary-Treasurer of SEIU United Service Workers West, told Commissioners about their training program that is designed and delivered by janitors to teach them how to respond in the moment to sexual harassment. Janitors who have experienced sexual harassment act out the most common situations they typically confront in the training videos. Over 100 janitors have been trained and they are partnering with employers and state agencies to implement the training program.

David G. Bowman, a partner at Morgan, Lewis & Bockius told the Commission that organizations must utilize a multi-faceted campaign that focuses on leaders setting the right tone, conducting a workplace culture assessment, and implementing different training formats that inspire employees to create a more positive setting that works for everyone. "It is important that organizations create a healthy top-down culture, where managers and leaders actively support the prospect of creating a healthier work environment," Bowman said.

Anne Wallestad, president and CEO of BoardSource, provided recommendations for board leadership to ensure accountability, from the perspective of nonprofit boards. Wallestad noted that the composition of a board, its complicity in harassment and effective oversight of its CEO are critical factors in determining its role in preventing workplace harassment. "Boards can't passively address allegations as they arise," Wallestad said.

"Boards needs to proactively examine how their organization's own culture may be contributing to an environment where harassment and abuse goes unchecked."

Rob Buelow, vice president of EVERFI, described how web-based training can be a complement to live training and how it fits into an overall harassment prevention program. "Rather than solely messaging to employees about what constitutes illegal behaviors, effective trainings will flip the narrative and focus on the organization's values and culture, encouraging employees to make decisions that are aligned with those values and reinforcing how positive behavior supports positive culture."

Business professor Christine Porath of Georgetown University touted the benefits of workplace civility training, which engages all employees by encouraging more positive gestures of respect, dignity or kindness. She added that when leaders are civil, it increases performance and helps employees feel safer and happier. "Incivility is associated with harassment as it creates a culture of disrespect in which harassment behaviors are tolerated," Porath said.

Another approach promoted by Professor Mary C. Gentile of Giving Voice to Values (GVV) is to assume that most people already want to act on their values, and just need support when it comes to adopting appropriate behaviors. GVV's curriculum provokes questions like, "WHAT IF" you were this person who wants to act in this values-driven manner (e.g., to respond to and stop harassing behaviors toward oneself or toward others) -- "what would you say and do to be effective?" GVV's goal is to "re-wire" the unconscious process that prevents people from intervening when they see bad behavior using peer coaching to convince employees to behave in ways that advance the success of the organization.

The Commission will hold open the Oct. 31, 2018 Commission meeting record for 15 days, and Invites audience members, as well as other members of the public, to submit written comments on any issues or matters discussed at the meeting. Public comments may be mailed to Commission Meeting, EEOC Executive Officer, 131 M Street, N.E., Washington, D.C. 20507, or emailed to: Commissionmeetingcomments@eoc.gov.

The comments provided will be made available to members of the Commission and to Commission staff working on the matters discussed at the meeting. In addition, comments may be published on EEOC's public website, or disclosed in response to Freedom of Information Act requests and in the Commission's library. Providing comments in response to this solicitation equals consent to their use and consideration by the Commission and to their public availability. Accordingly, do not include any information in submitted comments that you would not want made public, like home address, telephone number, etc. Also note that when comments are submitted by e-mail, the sender's e-mail address automatically appears on the message.

EEOC has posted biographies and statements of all panelists, and will post a video of the meeting within a few days, and a full transcript within a few weeks. These can all be found at <https://www.eoc.gov/eoc/meetings/index.cfm>.

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