

St. Catherine University

From the Selected Works of Sarah Rand, PhD

Spring March, 2019

MeToo Sexual Harassment in the Workplace - Creating a Valuable Topic Course (1).docx

Sarah Rand, *St. Catherine University*



Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/sarah-rand/7/>

#MeToo Sexual Harassment in the Workplace: Creating a Valuable Topic Course

Julie Beckel Nelsen, MBA

St. Catherine University

2004 Randolph Avenue

St. Paul, MN 55105

651-895-4448

jbnelsen@stkate.edu

Dr. Mary Unger Henderson

St. Catherine University

2004 Randolph Avenue

St. Paul, MN 55105

651-398-3142

muhenderson@stkate.edu

Dr. Sarah Rand

St. Catherine University

2004 Randolph Avenue

St. Paul, MN 55105

612-590-6986

sjrand@stkate.edu

Margaret Smith

UXL, Creating Successful Leaders

821 Raymond Avenue

Saint Paul, MN 55114

612-266-8997

margaret@youexcelnow.com

#MeToo Sexual Harassment in the Workplace: Creating a Valuable Topic Course

Introduction

The impact of sexual harassment on its victims and those close to them are damaging and often long-lasting. The destructive effects of sexual harassment are also costly for organizations and society, amounting to millions of dollars due to legal expenses, absenteeism, reduced efficiency, and job loss (Noor, 2017). In the wake of the #MeToo movement, which prompted women and men to disclose their experiences with sexual harassment, an awareness of the issue's pervasiveness has been raised, bringing about public debates.

The #MeToo movement has brought attention to an important issue; the floodgates have been opened, leaving employers and individuals to ask: "What should we do?" and "Are we/Am I protected?" While these are organizational concerns, as professors, we must see these issues from both an individual and collective society perspective. Universities across the country have begun to require an online-training course for students and staff related to the prevention of sexual assaults on campuses. While these may offer some value, this brief exposure to the issue is not enough to prepare our students to enter the workplace equipped with a framework for addressing these issues.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss our efforts to prepare students to take control and make a positive change as they enter the workplace; specifically, the authors developed and delivered a topics course entitled: #MeToo: Sexual Harassment in the Workplace. Our goal in offering this class was to equip our students to challenge workplace harassment and enable them to make positive changes in how their generation and future generations shape organizational

behavior. Our mission at the University is to prepare women to lead and influence [University, 2018], thus we viewed this course offering as mission-critical work. The most valuable component of our course was the incorporation of a full-day seminar on the topic. A panel of executives, HR Leaders, and attorneys specializing in workplace issues and those with harassment experience joined us to discuss the issue from multiple perspectives.

Literature Review

This literature review explores the history of sexual harassment in the United States and the rise of the #MeToo movement. Scholarly research on the issue of workplace sexual harassment initially appeared around 1981, when sexual harassment was first recognized as a social and legal wrong. Brodsky's (1976), even earlier research, explored the characteristics of harassed employees and their harassers and focused on methods of assessing and dealing with harassment in work situations and the nature of the harassment process; he did not focus on the type of harassment in his research. From an organizational perspective, Pryor and colleagues (1995) concluded that the social norms in specific corporate settings may "permit" sexual harassment and that when individuals with a proclivity for sexual harassment place themselves in social situations that permit or accept this sort of behavior, the conduct is most likely to occur. Raver and Gelfand (2005) researched outcomes associated with sexual harassment at the team level with an examination of the relationships between team members based on the frequency of sexually harassing behaviors experienced by individuals within the group. The authors found that sexual harassment resulted in team conflict, lower team cohesion and citizenship behaviors, and lowered team financial performance. Buchanan and colleagues (2014) reviewed system-level best practices that organizations can adopt to reduce sexual harassment in the workplace,

highlighting the importance of clear and consistent anti-harassment messages from organizational leaders.

Hopkins et. al (1982) examined the nature and extent of sexual harassment for female college graduates from 1945-1980. Responses to a questionnaire indicated that nearly 40 percent of the participants had experienced behaviors related to sexual harassment. Fairygodboss (2017), a women's job review website, released a survey on sexual harassment and the most disturbing finding is that peers (57 percent) more often sexually harass women than bosses (about 36 percent). The study found that the harassers are predominantly men under the age of 40. These findings underscore how pervasive the problem remains and that the issue is not solely tied to generational differences.

The emergence of the #MeToo movement, according to Schultz (2018), brought about a welcome, renewed focus on sexual harassment and motivated long-overdue terminations of accused harassers across industries. Pervasive narratives still narrowly emphasize sexualized forms of harassment and assault—at the expense of broader understandings of harassment and its causes. As the #MeToo movement is unfolding and evolving, it sheds light on female predators (Neumeister, 2018), men of power that recognize their culpability (Chapman & Pisani, 2017), reframing public norms (Bahr, 2018) and publicly visible rehabilitation (Smith, 2018).

Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook's Chief Operating Officer, said in a recent New York Times interview, "Sexual harassment has always been about power. We cannot have a rash of people coming out and people getting fired and then back to business as usual" (para. 4). Furthermore, she warned that, "There will be claims that aren't true, and if people feel there's going to be no process for vetting, that's where the backlash against women comes" (Bowles, 2017, para. 3).

Noguchi (2017) found evidence to this in a recent National Public Radio interview in which interviewees stated that baby boomer women say they "just put up with it because the only other recourse was to leave" (para. 3). Baby boomer daughters, members of Generation X, may have been taught the rules and regulations governing sexual harassment, but they seldom reported the incidents. Gen Y (or do we spell out "Generation Y" interviewees stated, "I cannot believe that any of you would put up with that in the workplaces" (para. 5).

Course Development and Delivery

As stated earlier, the mission of the University is to "...educate women to lead and influence" [University, 2018]. The university faculty is deeply committed to this purpose as well as to continuing the legacy of the religious order which founded the University. The Sisters are known for their work on social justice and their mission and values including "...to serve the dear neighbor without distinction" [Religious Congregation, 2018]. The work of the Sisters is alive today as students continue to come to the University for their academic studies and the overall transformational experience that occurs there. While here, students claim their voice to speak up about issues related to social justice and to advocate for themselves. At the University, students are educated and inspired to become leaders.

It seemed a natural progression from this position to recognize the #MeToo movement in a way that encouraged our students to think critically about issues of sexual harassment in the workplace through a topics course. A primary focus of the course was to examine current organizational strategies in place to address sexual harassment in the workplace and explore the impact of the #MeToo movement, as it was unfolding. The course delivery structure was comprised of online instruction and a mandatory one-day campus workshop. The full-day

workshop included lecture, class discussion, role-playing activities, and a panel of experts representing legal, managerial, and human resource perspectives on the impact of #MeToo and sexual harassment as a whole. A primary focus of the panel was to empower students to understand key issues, navigate organizational culture and policies, and work to enact positive change within their organization. The seminar also included testimonies from victims of sexual harassment in the workplace.

Dr. Mary Gentile (2010) writes about the importance of practicing “the skills and scripts necessary to effectively voice values-based positions...” (p. xxxiii) in her book, *Giving Voice to Values How to Speak Your Mind When You Know What’s Right*. Her framework was referenced in the course as a guide for addressing sexual harassment issues. In her book, she provides valuable resources for people to utilize when they face unethical and/or wrongful behavior. The basis for the book follows:

The thesis here is that if enough of us felt empowered – and were skillful and practiced enough – to voice and act on our values effectively on those occasions when our best selves are in the driver’s seat, business would be a different place. In other words, this book is not about changing who we are, but rather it is about empowering the parts of us that already want to do the right thing (p. xxiii).

An UXL executive career coach, Margaret Smith, shared the D4 Insights model (Insights, 2018) that helps guide a conversation and is especially helpful for those employees faced with having to share an experience they are uncomfortable with or it is the first time they have had to have this conversation. The model starts with defining the facts: What happened? When did it happen?, Who was involved? The second step focuses on how it made you feel and what impact

it may have had on the organization, your team, others involved or with you at the time. The final step is what action the individual would like taken, how she/he are willing to help or even what he/she could have done differently.

One of the authors used this successfully in giving feedback to a friend and co-worker that shared an embarrassing story that others were uncomfortable hearing; the story involved a supervisor that made an inappropriate comment and an employee that behaved in a manner that was not aligned to personal values. Here is one example conversation using the model:

Last Wednesday, when the team went out for lunch you told an inappropriate joke that embarrassed me and quite frankly, we all laughed, but I should have said something right away as I noticed the uncomfortable looks around the table. I care about you and your reputation and as a friend, you need to know that this could hurt you and it hurt others, including me. Let us make a vow to each other...if you do it again, I will step in, and you try to not tell a joke that is hurtful or makes fun of other's differences, can you do that?
(p. 2).

Anecdotal evidence has found this model to work. Practicing the model helps build confidence and makes sure the emotion does not over shadow the importance of the message. Clarity builds credibility.

Course assignments included readings, videos, podcasts and other information sources selected based on their timeliness and relevance to the course topic. Given the movement is an evolving phenomenon, no academic publications or textbooks that directly related to the impact of the movement were identified. News articles, videos, and industry reports did provide students with an understanding of how sexual harassment affects men and women, the legal implications of employment discrimination and sexual harassment, how the movement has

shifted workplace cultures and practices, and how the movement may influence workplaces moving forward. Students viewed videos exploring a broad range of situations that may be considered harassment. These assignments encouraged students to view the issues through a critical lens. For example, students contemplated whether organizations are doing enough to address the issues and if there may be unexpected consequences for victims, such as retaliation or victim blaming. During our class lectures and discussion, students were highly engaged in learning about how to build confidence in their own voices to advocate for themselves and others if confronted with a situations involving sexual harassment. Nike Corporation served as an example of a company currently facing accusations of unethical and illegal treatment of women by senior management.

Unique assignment prompts prepared students for each online class discussion. Prompts encouraged students to reflect on their values and consider how their actions align with their values. Prompts also focused on vocabulary and concepts related to sexual harassment issues and policies in United States as well as exploring the issues from various cultural and managerial perspectives. In each instance, students reflected upon how the topics were relevant to their own life experiences and workplace environments. We assessed the knowledge gained by students through online quizzes, online discussions, short written assignments, and a research/reflection paper. The most important deliverable was a research and reflection paper that addressed student's key learnings related to sexual harassment and the #MeToo movement. Student outcomes included:

- Developing a managerial, legal, ethical and cultural vocabulary as they relate to sexual harassment issues and policies in the United States' workplaces.

- Understanding the role of organizations in protecting and educating individuals in response to the current sexual harassment environment.
- Understanding how recent trends in sexual harassment awareness affect the workplace.
- Building confidence in their ability to navigate workplace environments when sexual harassment issues arise.

Only 31% of the students completed the online course evaluation. However, those students rated the class a 5.00/5.00 on the Likert scale. One student commented, “This course is very important, and I hope they continue to offer it to students” (personal communication, 2018). Another person stated, “I went through working in a company for 9 years and didn’t know close to what I know now after taking this class. I strongly recommend it to all students!” (personal communication, 2018). A student mentioned that she wished the course would last for an entire semester as opposed to just a summer session and she added, “I would have liked a little more on emotional intelligence [content in the course], but with the limited time, it’s understandable that we didn’t get to everything (personal communication, 2018).”

Conclusions

The destructive effects of sexual harassment are also costly for organizations and society. The #MeToo movement has brought attention to this important issue. At the University, students are educated and inspired to become leaders. As a result, we recognized the need to provide our students with an opportunity to think critically about issues related to sexual harassment in the workplace and the current movement. We accomplished this through the development and

delivery of a topics course that investigated the impact of the movement. The course explored organizational strategies to address sexual harassment and tools students could adopt to effectively respond to the challenges they may encounter. Our goal was to prepare students to challenge workplace harassment and enable them to shape organizational behavior in positive ways. Students also brought forward expectations for course learning outcomes including becoming more confident in using their own voice to address situations of harassment and developing strategies they could use to manage conflict in the workplace.

Feedback from students affirms that the course contained valuable, practical content that prepared them for their future in the workplace. They developed a vocabulary related to sexual harassment issues and increased their understanding of the role of organizations to respond to the current sexual harassment environment. Students also reported greater confidence in their ability to navigate workplace environments when sexual harassment issues arise.

Overall, the students were highly engaged in all aspects of the online curriculum as well as the all-day face-to-face class. The curriculum, guest executive speakers, readings, and participative exercises were meaningful in content and relevance. The most valuable components of our course were the incorporation of the full-day seminar and final reflection paper. From the authors' standpoints, developing and teaching this course was a rewarding experience. This *#MeToo: Sexual Harassment in the Workplace* course is scheduled to be offered again in the summer of 2019.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

While in the progress of writing this paper, additional cases of sexual harassment allegations arose at both Nike and Google. A cursory view of the management of these crisis situations suggest that further study needs conducting on best practices of dealing with public allegations. Further study related to the employee sentiment tied to the organizational response to these allegations would also be of interest. More needs to happen in researching this topic. Specifically, research needs to be done regarding how to best educate those soon to be entering the workforce on issues tied to workplace sexual harassment. Additional future research should be conducted related generational differences in how individuals perceive and address sexual harassment at work. While we experienced initial success in teaching this topic course, it is taught at an all-women's university. It is likely that the course would need modifications if taught in a co-ed environment. In addition, this course was taught in an educational environment; if it were taught in a work setting, it may also require modification.

References

- Bahr, Lindsey. (July 16, 2018). 1st Comic-Con of the MeToo era grapples with harassment. *Associated Press*.
- Bowles, N. (December 5, 2017). A Reckoning on Sexual Misconduct? Absolutely. But How Harsh, Women Ask. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/05/business/sexual-harassment-debates.html>
- Brodsky, C. M. (1976). The harassed worker. Oxford, England: D. C. Heath & Co.
- Buchanan, N, Settles, I., Hall, A. & O'Connor, R. (December 9, 2014). A Review of Organizational Strategies for Reducing Sexual Harassment: Insights from the U. S. Military. *Journal of Social Issues*.
- Chapman, M. & Pisani, J. (December 11, 2017). Mario Batali steps down after sexual misconduct allegations. *Associated Press*.
- Fairygodboss. (November 2017). Sexual Harassment in the Workplace Survey. Retrieved from: <https://fairygodboss.com/research/sexual-harassment-2017>
- Gentile, M. (2010). Giving voice to values how to speak your mind when you know what's right. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Hopkins, Hunter, Johnson & Alan. (Spring 1982). Sexual Harassment in the Work

Place. *Journal of College Placement*, v42 n3 p30-35

Insights Discovery. (2018). The D4 Model: Give feedback in four steps. UXL.com. Retrieved from <https://uxlblog.files.wordpress.com/2018/09/a0969-11-2016d4feedbackmodel.pdf>

Neumeister, Larry. (August 17, 2018). Student sues professor he says sexually harassed him. *Associated Press*.

Noguchi, Y. (December 12, 2017) Are there Generational differences when it comes to sexual harassment at Work? All Things Considered. *National Public Radio*.

Noor, M. (November 29, 2017). #MeToo: Insights from psychological theory and research - Understanding the nature of sexual harassment and prevention. *Psychology Today*.

Pryor, J., Giedd, J & Williams, K. (Spring 1995). A Social Psychological Model for Predicting Sexual Harassment. *Journal of Social Issues*. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.1995.tb01309.x>

Raver J. & Gelfand M. (2005) Beyond the individual victim: linking sexual harassment, team processes, and team performance. *Academic Management Journal*

Religious Congregation. (2018). *Mission and values*. Details omitted for double-blind reviewing.

Schultz, V. (April 19, 2018). Reconceptualizing Sexual Harassment, Again. Social Science Research Network. Retrieved from

<http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3165561>

Smith, Michelle. (April 15, 2018). In age of #MeToo, can there be forgiveness, second chances? *Associated Press*.

University. (2018). *Mission statement*. Details omitted for double-blind reviewing.