

Preventing sexual harassment: some actions for senior executives

What senior executives communicate to their employees and stakeholders and how they do it significantly shapes people’s attitudes to sexual harassment. One peer-reviewed study from 2018 found that messaging from a CEO who emphasised the severity of the problem versus one who downplayed the issue significantly affected whether or not staff saw sexual harassment as a ‘high-priority issue’. This pattern held no matter the participants’ gender or political affiliation.

How you lead and the visibility of that leadership makes a difference!

# Make Our Watch’s Workplace Equality and Respect Standards a part of your workplace’s core values

Our Watch Workplace Equality and Respect Standards

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| **Commitment:** We demonstrate an ongoing commitment to workplace gender equality and preventing sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence.  **Conditions:** We apply a gender lens to our workplace policies and practices to ensure they are fair and equitable.  **Culture:** We promote a workplace culture where all people feel safe, confident, and supported to actively challenge gender bias and discrimination, gender stereotypes and harmful gender norms without adverse consequences.  **Support:** We listen to, respect and support people who experience sexual harassment and gender-based violence (including domestic and family violence) through policies and practices that consider the impact of trauma.  **Core business:** We promote gender equality in our external engagement with customers, stakeholders, and the community. |

Here are some practical actions that you, as leaders, can take to prevent and mitigate the risks of sexual harassment in your workplaces.

## Commitment

* To know how to lead to prevent sexual harassment, build your understanding of the key drivers of sexual harassment.
* Invest in understanding your workplace’s formal and informal culture so you can promote positive norms, values, and behaviours that encourage a diverse, inclusive, gender-equal workplace.
* Be vocal about your commitment to inclusion and gender equality, and clearly communicate this commitment to all employees and stakeholders.
* Build into leadership communication, policy, and practice that speaking up and taking action against sexual harassment is everyone’s responsibility and a workplace health and safety obligation.
* Make promoting gender equality and preventing sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence a leadership priority by establishing good practice, ensuring that your workplace’s risk management approach addresses non-financial risks, like psychosocial risks (which includes sexual harassment), and collaborating with industry partners and prevention experts to develop a collective approach to preventing sexual harassment.
* Stay informed by mandating oversight over incidents, promoting regular reporting and ensuring that the actions of executives and board members are data-informed.
* Measure the impact of leadership on changing organisational culture.
* Set, endorse, and regularly review gender equality and diversity targets.

## Conditions

* Establish (and promote from the top) a common framework and language for identifying, raising and responding to sexual harassment.
* Ensure that organisational systems, processes and communications recognise sexual harassment as a type of workplace harm and risk.
* Sponsor policies and procedures that support a commitment to gender equality and the prevention of sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence so employees of all genders feel safe and supported.
* Proactively support the development and implementation of workplace policies that enable all employees to balance caring and work responsibilities, including parental leave (encourage men who are becoming parents to take leave) and flexible work policies (including working from home, job sharing, and part-time hours). These should be accessible to all employees. Use the ‘If not, why not?’ logic to support your decision-making. Senior leaders should demonstrate the use of these policies. Other leave provisions that foster a gender-inclusive and culturally supportive work environment include (but are not limited to) Sorry Business for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff, in acknowledgment of their cultural obligations; floating public holidays for staff of different religious, cultural and political beliefs; domestic violence leave; and gender affirmation leave (for staff who are transitioning gender).
* Use recruitment and promotion strategies to create a diverse workforce (across gender identity, race, ability, sexual orientation, age, and other identity markers). These strategies and processes should include criteria for fostering a safe, respectful and inclusive organisational culture and modelling this conduct. All recruitment materials, contracts and performance management frameworks must articulate this focus on safety, respect and inclusion.
* Analyse remuneration practices to close any identified gender pay gaps.

## Culture

* Model inclusive, respectful leadership in all interactions with employees and external stakeholders.
* Invest in ongoing workplace-wide learning and capacity-building tailored to roles and responsibilities. The purpose of these initiatives should be to have staff understand the range of behaviours that constitute sexual harassment and what drives this behaviour, the importance of workplace contributions to preventing gendered-based violence, the value of being an active bystander, and employees’ role in prevention and response to sexual harassment. Ensure that all learning/training materials, corporate events and resources that address sexual harassment recognise the diverse experiences and needs of workers, including women, LGBTIQA+ workers, CALD workers and workers with disability.
* Celebrate positive behaviours that promote safe, inclusive and respectful workplaces, and acknowledge employees who take active steps to prevent and respond to sexual harassment in your workplace.
* Instruct people managers to regularly communicate about respectful conduct, the workplace’s stance on sexual harassment, and the consequences for perpetrators.

## Support

* Provide employees with tools and language to help them safely raise concerns about inappropriate behaviour in the moment and/or support those who may be impacted (active bystander training).
* Make sure internal teams can respond appropriately to sexual harassment (this may include having contact officers or managers trained in managing disclosures).
* Create a workplace environment in which it is safe for people to speak up via anonymous reporting channels. You might not be able to act on an anonymous complaint, but you will be able to identify ‘hot spots’ and areas of risk in your business.
* Introduce clear guidelines and principles around confidentiality and transparency for high-profile sexual harassment cases, in line with the emerging advice from Respect@Work on removing non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) from the process.
* Review your use of non-disclosure agreements.

## Core business

* Create a well-resourced team tasked with achieving inclusive gender equality.
* Seek opportunities to positively influence gender equality in your engagements with clients, customers, suppliers and communities.
* Join communities of practice (such as Champions of Change) to peer-learn from other leaders how to implement and sustain positive workplace change. Access a mentor if appropriate.
* Participate in industry-specific gender equality and diversity and inclusion initiatives and advocacy.

# Further information

**For more information, tools and resources** on how to prevent sexual harassment in your workplace, visit [Our Watch – Workplace Equality and Respect](https://workplace.ourwatch.org.au) <workplace.ourwatch.org.au>

# Acknowledgements

Our Watch acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land across Australia on which we work and live. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples past and present, and we value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures, and knowledge.

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 Australian Government

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