

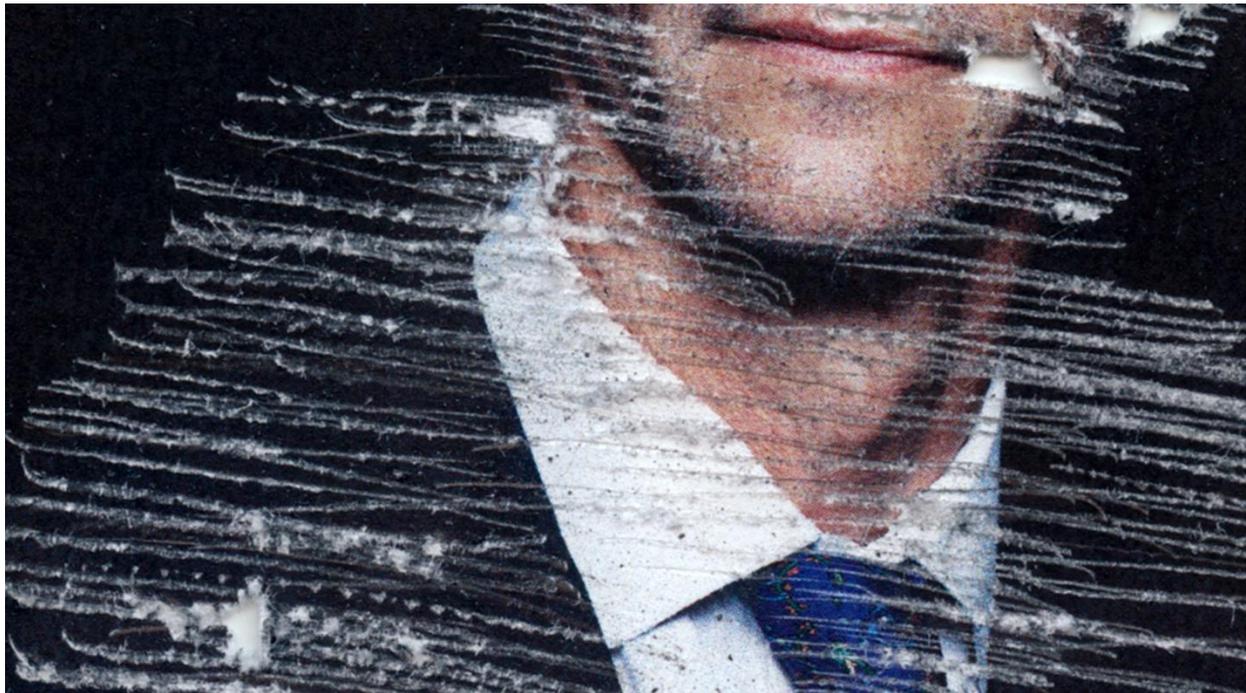
MANAGING #METOO

BAD BEHAVIOR IS PREVENTABLE

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The recent tsunami of media stories about sexual harassment signals the deep need for a cultural reset in the workplace, one that will require all organizations to put in place new processes and new training. Leaders and managers simply cannot afford to maintain the status quo.



But first they must understand the problem, and that's not as easy as it sounds. Sexual harassment is a form of dysfunctional behavior within the workplace — and a chronic phenomenon with a long history. Research indicates that more than 70% of women have experienced it on the job, but many incidents of it go unreported. One reason is that the legal definition of sexual harassment is rarely understood. Further complicating the issue, no

consensus has formed around lay definitions of sexual harassment, which differ from the legal definition and have changed over the years. In particular, men and women differ in their understanding of what constitutes it.

Even the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission is frustrated. The EEOC has recognized sexual harassment as discrimination for more than four decades. Seven out of 10 companies have training to deter it. Yet in 2016 the EEOC concluded workplace harassment remains a continual problem and asked, “Why does so much harassment persist and take place in so many of our workplaces? And, most important of all, what can be done to prevent it? After 30 years — is there something we’ve been missing?”

There is no easy solution, but evidence shows that sexual harassment *is* preventable. However, the EEOC’s recommended training guidelines need to change. New and different approaches must be explored. And they’re exactly what we’ve been working on.

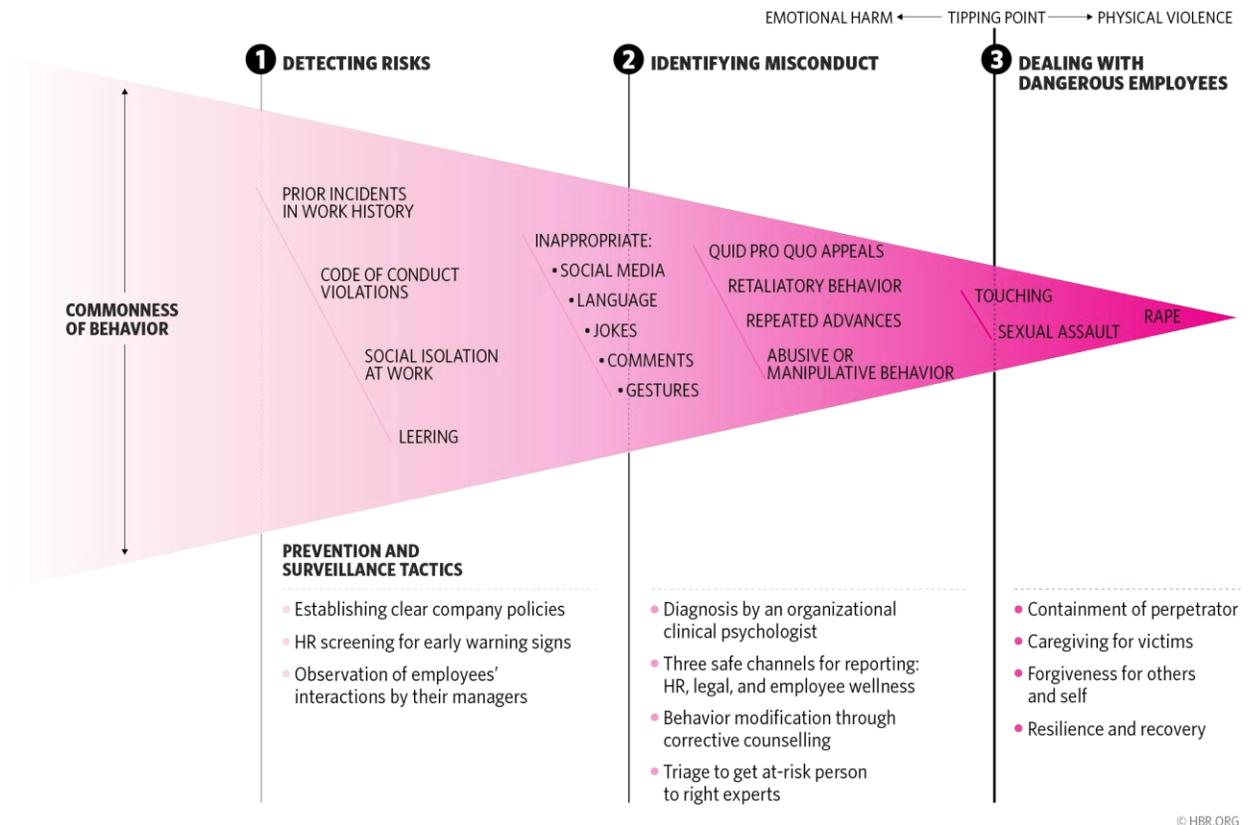
For insights, we turned to the three-stage life-history prevention surveillance model that public officials have long used to stave off health epidemics. We believe that a similar data-based approach can effectively prevent harassment in the workplace. The new model we’ve developed to help companies draws extensively from the public health one.

One key to our model is a focus on high-risk employees. Most organizations have relatively few of them. On the basis of what we’ve seen in our work, we estimate that 1% to 3% of individuals within an organization have the potential to become deviant, dysfunctional, or dangerous. And while it’s difficult to screen out sexual harassers in the hiring process, it is possible to identify and address them within a work population before they pose a threat to others.

Like health epidemics, the worst cases of sexual harassment very rarely happen out of the blue. A chain of events or conditions almost always precedes them. Understanding what they are is critical to nipping misconduct in the bud.

Often, You Can See It Coming

The path to sexual assault contains lots of warning signs. By using a three-stage approach that's based on the public health model for preventing epidemics, companies can spot potential issues before they descend into full-blown violence.



Our model addresses the three stages that generally occur as high-risk employees become sexual harassers. Here is what happens in each:

Stage 1: At this stage organizations have risk factors for or conditions that are conducive to sexual harassment, such as a work environment with a very high male-to-female ratio or where positions of power and supervision are predominantly held by men. These conditions don't mean sexual harassment is inevitable, but they increase the probability that problems will arise. Men who would not act out in environments with more cultural constraints may well do so when their power and influence are unchecked and even unmonitored.

Stage 2: Here we see low-intensity sexual harassment, such as conversations and language with sexual overtones. Dialogues usually aren't seductive in nature, but under the surface they're hostile, aimed at putting women down and keeping them "in their place." Off-color stories and what some may consider "jokes" are also warning signs of a work environment that may pave the way for higher-intensity sexual harassment.

Stage 3: At this stage full-blown sexual assault, such as rape, happens. These incidents may well become federal legal cases, draining individual and organizational energy, time, and money. They absolutely must not be ignored or pushed to the side.

If employee behavior is allowed to reach this stage, it's massively costly. U.S. organizations, in particular, have more at stake than their counterparts around the globe, because they, not just the individuals involved, can be held responsible for workplace sexual harassment claims. In any case, direct costs include turnover, absenteeism, sick leave, reduced performance, and litigation. Indirect costs include motivation, morale, and dissatisfaction problems, along with compromises to the quality of working relationships, such as distrust, disrespect, and animosity. Many people pay the price. Sexual harassment adversely impacts not only the target but also the aggressor, bystanders, customers, suppliers, contractors, and other stakeholders.

WHAT TO DO TO PREVENT SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Our model offers a set of interventions for each of the three stages. When systematically applied, these measures reduce or eliminate sexual harassment. The best place to intervene is the first stage, of course, where an organization's efforts will have the broadest impact and help eradicate conditions that may give rise to misconduct.

Primary prevention of sexual harassment can be thought of as the sills and joists of your policy. It is the foundation for all other interventions. It begins with a clear statement of policy banning all forms of sexual harassment, explicitly linked to mechanisms that will enforce compliance. Your HR department should systematically screen the organization for early warning signs, such as violations of the code of conduct or prior incidents in people's work histories. Primary prevention also includes comprehensive training and education at all levels of the hierarchy, but especially at the first line of supervision. As the EEOC states, middle managers and first-line supervisors, when trained correctly, can be an organization's most valuable resource in stopping sexual harassment. So companies ought to teach them how to create a culture in which all individuals are treated with respect and where power is used with restraint. And all managers and supervisors should observe their reports' interactions with colleagues and flag anything that might require corrective action.

Secondary prevention targets lower-intensity forms of sexual harassment, squelching it before any serious harm has been done. Secondary prevention focuses on identifying and eliminating incivility and bullying. These negative behaviors often lead to higher absenteeism, tardiness, accidents, and safety violations, so companies should monitor their data on these, as well as supervisor's reports about peers and employees, for signs that people are not being treated respectfully.

In an ideal world, all people associated with an organization — employees, supervisors, contractors, and even customers and bystanders — would be comfortable reporting any unacceptable behavior they see in it. The organization's responsibility is to provide an environment that makes them feel that way. An important step is setting up at least three safe channels for reporting harassment: one in the HR function, one in the legal function, and one in an employee-wellness function. Trained professionals will need to be brought in to help

diagnose, assess, and triage cases of harassment. Providing direct feedback to offending individuals is critical. They should be reprimanded for deviating from the organization's code of conduct but also be given the opportunity to apologize for their behavior and alter it. Individual training in interpersonal communication, both on how to respect others and how to clearly communicate personal boundaries, often can redress low-intensity incidents. The EEOC also suggests that bystander intervention training can help prevent sexual harassment, and our review of the research supports that idea. Organization-wide civility training may be a new opportunity for combating sexual harassment too, according to the EEOC.

Tertiary intercession is needed when primary and secondary prevention fail, and an incident of high-intensity sexual harassment occurs. Companies should be prepared for the worst and act immediately to minimize any suffering or damage incurred, while also treating all involved fairly. We recommend a four-step approach:

- **Containment.** Restrain the dangerous individual engaged in harassment behavior.
- **Caregiving.** Provide help to the targets of harassment and the people who've been exposed to it, such as witnesses or close colleagues of the target.
- **Forgiveness.** This does not mean absolving the offender or forgetting what happened. It means forgiving people for allowing harassment to happen. Kim Cameron at the University of Michigan has written incisively about [why forgiveness is essential](#) to recovery after harm and damage have occurred at work.
- **Resilience.** The organization must bounce back from the tragedy of the incident.

Sexual aggressors destroy lives, leaving long legacies of suffering. Yet sexual harassment in the workplace is an occupational health problem that does not occur in isolation. Rather, it's generally a result of cumulative events and thus predictable and preventable. Workplace sexual harassment is no accident, and with proper surveillance and prevention mechanisms, it may be eliminated altogether. THE BIG IDEA

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