News Article

Improving our workplace culture

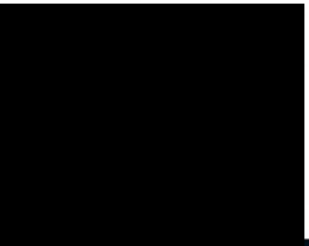Published 22/11/2017

Judith Mackinnon, Head of People Advice, guest blogs on the importance of ensuring ours is a positive, respectful and inclusive workplace.

It's been hard to miss recent media coverage of sexual harassment claims in Hollywood, and subsequently in Westminster and the Scottish Parliament.

It's a stark reminder that sexual harassment and inappropriate behaviour is more common than we might like to think, and it can happen anywhere to anyone.

Employers have particular responsibilities to ensure they encourage a respectful and inclusive working environment. I've spent time with numerous organisations and in HR professional communities developing and supporting actions that make a positive, inclusive workplace more likely. And, unfortunately, just as much time providing support when their experience falls

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Employers have particular responsibilities to ensure they encourage a respectful and inclusive working environment. I've spent time with numerous organisations and in HR professional communities developing and supporting actions that make a positive, inclusive workplace more likely. And, unfortunately, just as much time providing support when their experience falls short of what any of us would find 'acceptable' or 'fair'.

[Redacted]

Thanks to the recent media coverage everyone is talking about this issue right now, so we have a perfect opportunity to change things for the better. One thing is clear from my experience - things don't change just because we say they should, things change because people engage in an issue and talk about it.

When we talk about contentious issues we're sharing our expectations of each other and letting each other know what makes us uncomfortable.

Talking about appropriate behaviour can help us identify – and take action to address sexist, negative or non inclusive language and actions that create barriers, perpetuate stereotypes, create misunderstandings and misperceptions and, let's be honest, cause stress and pain.

Talking about our expectations of others gives us confidence to recognise and challenge language or behaviour that we know is inappropriate or uncomfortable for us or our colleagues. Our culture is the sum of our individual behaviours after all: this really is about how you and I behave towards each other, how you and I speak to each other and how we work together.

The Permanent Secretary has asked us to reflect on our behaviour towards each other and to bring unacceptable behaviour out of the shadows, so it can be addressed. I think that's a fair ask and part of the responsibility we all have to shape our culture.

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Of course I also thought 'well, my team is fine...' but this is something we should regularly check. So we had a short chat about sexual harassment, more generally how we are treated, how we treat others, and the potential positive and negative implications of our behaviour. I encourage you do the same in your own teams.

Please remember there are a number of professional and independent sources of support if you need them.

Find out more

Support:

- The Employee Assistance Programme helpline is open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Call free on [Redacted] for:

  - emotional and practical support from trained welfare and counselling practitioners offering confidential, independent and unbiased information and guidance
  - referrals for 1-2-1 counselling support
  - support for managers who are dealing with sensitive or traumatic situations

- Contact the in-house Counselling and Wellbeing Officer, [Redacted]
- Trade union members can seek support from their union representative.

Contacts:

- [Redacted] or [Redacted]
- text Gillian Russell, Director, Safer Communities, **confidentially** on [Redacted].

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[Redacted] 29/11/2017 16:44   👍1

I greatly welcome the very clear lead you and the Permanent Secretary have taken - thank you.

Could some of the issues brought up in any team discussion be reported in Saltire please, both to offer some consistency across the organisation and so staff whose area does not have such a conversation, or misses it, can be involved eg a list of unacceptable words, phrases or behaviours people do not wish to permit in our organisation or have experienced. Some of the unacceptable behaviour (and indeed all that I've experienced in my work life) may come from non-SG employees (eg stakeholders, Ministers, SpAds, members of the public) and guidance on what to do in those scenarios might prove helpful.

And are we brave enough for a #me too Saltire poll asking over the past few years (for all unacceptable behaviour, not just sexual harassment)? Could even have:
experienced & called out
experienced & silent
witnessed & called out
witnessed & silent

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[Redacted] 23/11/2017 08:27   👍 6

A change of culture does not happen overnight, it takes a long while to become accepted - but it has to start somewhere, at sometime and this is it for inappropriate behaviour. In time, this sort of thing will become as unacceptable as drinking and driving, not wearing seatbelts or smoking in non-smoking areas to all of us. In the meantime, there are systems and procedures to deal with unwanted behaviour in the workplace - use them. I would say (and it is not easy) challenge any issues you encounter right there and then, that person may not know that he or she is causing any offence, but they will - as soon as you tell them.

↳ Reply   Report

[Redacted] 22/11/2017 11:59   👍 15

Thanks for the blog Judith. The recent high profile of this issue has made me think back to incidents that

took place much earlier in my career which I didn't "call out" at the time. I've been reflecting on whether this was because the cultural climate was different back then, or if it was because I was more junior and didn't feel I could speak up. I suspect it was a bit of both, but I also imagine that it we'd been having this kind of an open conversation at the time, it would have been much easier to say "me too". That's why we need to keep on talking about what is and isn't acceptable, bringing our experiences out of the shadows, and having the confidence and support to name the things that make us feel uncomfortable.

↳ Reply   Report

22/11/2017 09:34   👍 24

Redacted   22/11/2017 11:59   👍 15

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↳ Reply   Report

Redacted   22/11/2017 09:34   👍 24

Thank you for creating this space. So many will have experienced something, somewhere on this spectrum, either at work or elsewhere. Saltire comments aren't the place to document those examples   so I'll just repeat thanks for bringing this difficult, but necessary, issue out of the shadows and into the forefront of how we, collectively and individually, conduct ourselves at work.

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