HeRoes: How HR Leaders Can Help End Sexual Violence Against Women

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Cover Page Footnote
Special thanks to my wife for her work to help victims of sexual violence in Utah County, and special thanks to W. Gibb Dyer for his support and advice as I wrote this article.

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A recent video from the It’s On Us organization depicts a humorous situation involving a group of friends facing the serious possibility that one of them would be eaten by a hungry bear. What if one in five people in the United States were attacked by a bear? Would cries of outrage echo in strongly worded speeches, lengthy letters from lobbyists, or preaching from pulpits? The Center for Disease Control Reported in 2012 that nearly one in five women in our country experiences rape or another form of sexual assault at some point in her lifetime, yet this serious social issue regularly fails to garner persistent attention. This number is likely understated as well, due to the fact that as many as 74 percent of assaults are never reported to authorities. The time has come when neither business leaders nor society can ignore the “bear” in the room.

Some of the cultural factors that contribute to the problem of sexual violence, as well as the major negative consequences for individuals and businesses are complex and difficult to solve. However, the more society understands these issues, the greater the capacity to tackle the problem will be. Human resources leaders in organizations today are uniquely equipped to act on this issue and help alleviate the problem because of the competencies associated with their role. Key ways that businesses can help combat the problem include HR skills, such as (a) change management and culture development, (b) employee training and education, (c) company policy, and (d) benefits strategy.
Cultural Factors

HR and organizational development as disciplines define culture as the combination of values, assumptions, beliefs, and artifacts that influence how members of an organization behave and interact with one another. All cultures throughout the world whether in countries, organizations, or other groups develop the values and beliefs over time that then become evident in the artifacts around them. A commonly cited contributor to the perpetuation of sexual violence is “rape culture.” Marshall University describes rape culture as “an environment in which rape is prevalent and in which sexual violence against women is normalized and excused in the media and popular culture. Rape culture is perpetuated through the use of misogynistic language, the objectification of women’s bodies, and the glamorization of sexual violence, thereby creating a society that disregards women’s rights and safety.”

Media

Media is the central means for perpetuating rape culture by popularizing themes of male dominance and objectification of women. Any similar form of media communicates inferiority of women and normalizes sexually violent behavior from men.

A Google Image search of “rape culture in advertising” or “racy advertising” displays unbelievably shocking and raunchy results, demonstrating that degrading media practices like these are far too common when business leaders fail to see how their contributions objectify the female body and add to the vast repository for artifacts of rape culture. Problematically, artifacts like these advertisements, popular television shows, and other forms of media subtly teach harmful gender stereotypes such as submissiveness for women and power/aggression for men. Some particularly painful examples of this can be seen in advertisements from well-known companies such as Dolce & Gabbana and Carl’s Jr.

Pornography represents a prime example of and a strong driving force behind rape culture. Although studies up to this point have failed to identify a causal relationship between pornography and sexual violence, they do indicate that pornography tends to reinforce mentally objectifying women and sexualizing them in a subordinating way. A common myth about sexual violence is that sexual desire is the main motivator when, in reality, the motivation is power and control. Much of pornographic material is male-centric and emphasizes their power and control over women. Dr. Robert Jensen of the University of Texas at Austin noted:

Interviews with pornography users and sex offenders, and [examination of] various other researchers’ work, have led me to conclude that pornography can (1) be an important factor in shaping a male-dominant view of sexuality; (2) be used to initiate victims and break down their resistance to unwanted sexual activity; (3) contribute to a user’s difficulty in separating sexual fantasy and reality; and (4) provide a training manual for abusers.

Jensen goes on to recount testimony from several offenders stating they would use their victims as a way to re-enact the behaviors they viewed in pornographic material.

Lack of Education

A number of organizations nationwide cite lack of education as an additional barrier to preventing sexual assault. Specifically, false beliefs about what constitutes a sexual crime and the definition of consent may play a major role in perpetuating the problem. A study conducted by the National Sexual Violence Resource Center noted that only 67 percent of men and 79 percent of women say “sexual intercourse where one of the partners is pressured to give their consent” is assault. Violence is far more likely to be committed by those who do not understand consent.
Another problem with education is the perpetuation of rape myths. These myths are common misconceptions about sexual violence, such as:

- Women lie about rape because they feel guilty.
- Rape is only committed by strangers.
- Rape is caused by uncontrollable sexual desire.
- Women who dress immodestly should expect that they are more likely to be raped.
- If a victim has had past intimate relations or does not fight back then the act was not rape.

The first problem with these myths and a myriad of others is that studies disprove them. For example, most studies estimate that the false reporting rate for rape is somewhere around two percent. The effect that myths such as these have on the ability to hold perpetrators accountable is reflected in Figure 1.

In addition, many victims do not fight back due to a condition known as “Tonic Immobility,” which indicates a “freeze” response under conditions of extreme fear or duress rather than the traditional fight-or-flight responses. The second problem with rape myths is they often lead to victim blaming, where victims are given responsibility for what they did or did not do that led to the assault. While subtle, examples of victim blaming are found everywhere and evident in practices that focus solely on teaching women how not to get raped, rather than teaching men not to rape women and how to be engaged bystanders in preventing future violence.

### Consequences

#### For Individuals

Victims of sexual violence frequently experience various problems with mental, emotional, and physical health that can persist for extensive periods of time following the traumatic event. A primary issue of concern is post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD. Symptoms of PTSD can include nightmares, flashbacks, and intense physical responses as well as uncharacteristically strong feelings of stress, fear, anxiety, and nervousness that can make daily functioning difficult. Individuals with PTSD often go to great lengths to avoid reminders of the trauma and alter habits that were once normal to them. PTSD presents itself in approximately 94% of survivors of rape, compared with 36% of survivors of mass shootings and 25% for crime in general.
Connected with assault-related PTSD is rape trauma syndrome. This particular subset of traumatic symptoms involves a process of crisis, adjustment, and resolution that can take significant time to work through. Treatment of PTSD for victims includes various types of therapy that help them in their efforts to normalize their lives.

**For Business**

The terrible consequences faced by survivors of assault also bring about negative effects on businesses in three ways:

1. Complaints with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission that lead to a damaged reputation
2. Productivity
3. Employee turnover

In 2016, the EEOC reported over $40 million in monetary benefits paid out by companies that failed to take sexual harassment (a form of sexual assault) seriously. These costs directly affect a company’s profitability and reputation. A very recent example of the type of damage that can result from sexual assault is the Harvey Weinstein fiasco. Fortune magazine reported that his company will likely be sold or shut down completely as a result of the issue.

Symptoms of PTSD can also affect trust, communication, and problem-solving abilities. When individuals suffering from PTSD need to work in teams and develop new relationships or respond well to authority figures, they may experience difficulty in doing so. This is because the experience of assault most often represents a serious breach in trust by someone who they know or by someone in authority over them. The CDC found that more than 21 percent of woman victims missed an average of eight work days after an assault, and another study found that productivity losses related to this issue in the past have reached an annual total of $287.5 million. Effective work teams rely on trust, commitment, and problem solving to succeed, and clearly the consequences of sexual violence inside and outside of the workplace can negatively affect the performance of individuals and teams in a company.

Turnover also presents a negative consequence for business leaders when their employees experience a sexual assault. The same study above noted that national costs of turnover related to sexual assault problems reached over $24 million.

**How HR Can Bring About Change**

Overcoming this problem is not simple, and HR leaders are not the experts nor are their skillsets the end-all to change the status quo for such a complex social problem; however, their competencies offer a clear path to help society in its efforts to prevent and alleviate the problem through the following actions:

1. Understand how to change the culture
2. Educate employees through training programs
3. Change company policy
4. Incorporate a benefits strategy

**Changing Culture**

The first way HR leaders can help prevent sexual violence is by changing the culture of their organization. These leaders know that changing culture starts with changing the artifacts, values, beliefs, and assumptions that are foundational to that particular culture. Far too often, some businesses may operate for a time on the
principle that “sex sells.” Consequently, advertisements like those displayed earlier become artifacts that contribute to the development of rape culture in our society. HR can take the lead in ensuring that their companies do not create media that encourages the previously discussed elements of rape culture. Furthermore, they can create an internal culture that has little tolerance for beliefs and practices that degrade women in any way or minimize offenses against them.

The Harvard Business Review printed an article by John Kotter in January 2007 that outlined the key steps to creating change within an organization. These steps include:

- Establish a sense of urgency.
- Form a powerful guiding coalition.
- Create a vision.
- Communicate the vision.
- Empower others to act.
- Plan for and create short-term wins.
- Consolidate improvements and do not declare victory too soon.
- Institutionalize approach until a new norm is established.  

These powerful steps help ensure that changes made in organizations and their culture are both successful and permanent. While no studies suggest that the business wisdom translates directly into successful community change, the possibility for strong parallels seems reasonable. As HR leaders both within and without their companies build urgency around this problem, seek support from powerful leaders and those most affected, create and communicate a compelling vision of a safer world and workplace for the women in our lives, empower others to speak up and take a stand, celebrate small victories along the way, and focus on continuous improvements until positive changes are entrenched in our culture, we may very well see notable improvements in both our businesses and society.

**Education**

The second way to attack the problem of sexual violence is education. Employee training and education has the potential to be a powerful tool in preventing sexual assault by (1) teaching about consent and rape myths, (2) educating individuals about abuse and healthy relationships, and (3) directing survivors to resources so they will find the help they need.

As HR leaders develop onboarding and yearly training programs, they can include curriculum that clearly...
teaches all employees about the proper definition of consent, particularly by reminding employees that the absence of a “no” does not mean “yes.” Furthermore, trainings are fantastic opportunities to debunk myths about sexual assault like the ones shared previously and make clear statements about what kinds of behaviors qualify as sexual harassment. In addition, employees should be given the opportunity to learn the abuse cycle and how to identify whether they or a colleague or loved one may be in an abusive relationship. Finally, training presents an ideal opportunity for HR to inform employees who may be victims about what resources are available to them within the company, and who they can talk to if they need help or direction in finding external resources as well.

**Company Policy**

A third and essential way that HR leaders can help fight the problem of sexual assault is through company policy. Many companies have policies against the use of pornography in the workplace as well as guidelines derived from Title VII and Title IX laws that aim to protect employees from sexual harassment and provide equal employment opportunities. Regarding pornography use, accessing such material at work can constitute sexual harassment in itself. According to the Society for Human Resource Management, images on pornographic sites have been used as evidence in lawsuits to demonstrate offensive and sexually hostile work environments. Implementing a one-strike rule may be an effective way to communicate a company’s values regarding pornography. This rule would allow for one warning before terminating an employee.

When dealing with issues of sexual harassment, employers should consider how to communicate and implement a zero-tolerance policy. Just one instance of harassment could potentially cost the company millions of dollars. If sexual harassment is reported, HR should conduct an investigation examining the severity of the behavior and follow a one-strike rule as well, unless the situation merits immediate termination. Furthermore, if an employee is alleged to have committed sexual crimes outside of the workplace, suspension or termination may be necessary to preserve the reputation of the company and send a clear message that sexual assault of any kind will not be tolerated.

If HR is working to build a culture that abhors sexual violence and stands for equality of women, the strictness of policies like these sends a strong message about what kind of behavior is acceptable from their people. Not only do these policies aim for prevention and accountability, but they communicate to victims that the company culture is one that believes survivors and wants to protect women in the workplace and in the community.

**Benefits Strategy**

Rather than a step towards prevention, benefits present an opportunity to help alleviate the negative consequences of the problem. At any given time, HR leaders can view their female workforce and know that 20 percent of them have either already experienced some form of sexual assault in their lifetime, or will in the future. Unfortunately, even the best HR leaders will not be able to prevent sexual assault from happening to all of their female employees. Such a staggering number means that many will need mental health services that include various types of therapy, and involvement in other forms of wellness programs to aid their recovery.
While many companies offer different types of wellness programs with services ranging from gym passes and health screenings to addiction recovery resources, these wellness programs may not be sufficient to meet the needs of those who are dealing with PTSD related to a sexual assault. An increasing number of companies are recognizing the need to include mental health benefits in employee health-insurance plans. One way that HR can take the lead in helping alleviate the suffering of victims in their workforce is to provide 100 percent coverage for psychological services related to PTSD. By doing so, cost would no longer be a preventing factor for survivors seeking professional help, and they would be able to receive services without worrying about needing to disclose their trauma to someone in HR whom they do not know. Although there may be a potential increase in cost to companies who pursue this course, aligning benefits with company culture and values is an important element of retention and talent acquisition, which may help decrease costs in other ways.

Furthermore, prevention helps cut costs associated with absenteeism, turnover, and medical needs. Third, employees and society are increasingly demanding evidence of corporate social responsibility. Businesses willing to take a stand and demonstrate by action the importance of protecting women will set themselves apart from companies that do not. In doing so, they will be more likely to attract great talent and increase diversity, both of which have a direct effect on a firm's success. Fourth, the world will be a better place for women everywhere. Especially the ones we hold near and dear to our hearts. They will be able to face each day with less fear, empowered to embrace life with confidence and keep strong faith in human goodness.

Too often society views sexual assault as a “women’s problem.” In reality, sexual violence against women is a problem that belongs to everyone. Not only does such a terrible trauma affect survivors, but also their families and loved ones. The problem of sexual violence belongs to all of us and will not go away by itself. HR leaders and well-intended businesses will not be able to single-handedly rid the world of this issue, but they are in a fantastic position to help. As they seek to truly understand the magnitude of this problem and the consequences on the mental, emotional, and physical health of survivors, they will clearly see the link to resulting business problems as well. With the right motivation, HR leaders can use their skills to act by changing culture within their companies, educating their employees, creating strong company policies, and offering benefits that help survivors on the road to recovery. As they do so, the world and the workplace can be better, safer places for the women in our lives.

**Conclusion**

The benefits of HR leaders implementing the described solutions are numerous. First, businesses that are willing to fight for change will see a decrease in sexual assault claims to the EEOC and have lower costs for settlements. Second, any assaults that can be prevented will help the women in their workforce be more productive and healthier, which leads to higher performing teams that produce business outcomes.
"Businesses willing to take a stand and demonstrate by action the importance of protecting women will set themselves apart from companies who do not."

Notes

1. It’s On Us https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=LNVFPmZTQ4
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
15. Fuse et al., 2007; Galiano et al., 1993; Heidt et al., 2005
24. Ibid.
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