

PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION STRATEGIES TO COMBATING WORKPLACE SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Sexual harassment is a persistent and pervasive workplace problem. Combatting WSH requires multiple prevention and intervention strategies designed to be effective at various points. Primary prevention, Secondary intervention and Tertiary intervention.



PRIMARY PREVENTION STRATEGIES

Aimed at preventing WSH, and understanding how to respond, these include intentionally developing an organizational culture that discourages WSH (including modeling of appropriate behaviours by leadership), establishing policies to address WSH, and providing training.

There are four goals at this point: to reduce the number of occurrences, to remove factors that cause WSH, to prevent the development of risk factors for WSH, and to enhance protective factors against WSH. Several success factors for policy and training are outlined below.

Resources & Websites:

WorkSafe NB: www.worksafenb.ca

Sexual Violence NB: www.svnb.ca

SaferPlaces NB: www.saferplacesnb.ca

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POLICIES

An organization's WSH policy is the physical representation of the organization's commitment to eliminating WSH. The quality of the policy and its ability to create change in the workplace are based on the following key characteristics:

SUPPORT: There must be a clear understanding about WSH at all levels of the organization. All leaders must understand what defines WSH, and what penalties may be incurred by the organization as a result.

VISIBILITY: The policies should be widely known. Clear behavioural norms should be set. Statements that harassment will not be tolerated should be visibly placed throughout the workplace (visible to both employees and the public).

CLEAR PROCEDURES AND PROTECTIONS: Employee confidence will be increased when the policy makes it clear how they can easily access advice on the topic. This access should be available through multiple communication channels.

EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT: The organization must commit adequate resources to policy development, support, and training.

CONSEQUENCES: The policy should clearly state that the organization intends to enforce seriously and promptly, and the penalties for breach of policy. The certainty of punishment is more effective than having occasional severe punishments that are not applied consistently.

SUPPORT GENDER EQUALITY: The organization's overall commitment and support for gender equality goals also strengthens the efforts to prevent WSH.

An example of an effective workplace harassment policy can be found at Safer Places NB:

https://saferplacesnb.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Safer-Places_Employers-Sample-Policy-ENG_Interactive_Web.pdf

TRAINING

Training for both employees and leaders is crucial to stopping workplace sexual harassment. The introduction of a policy, even a well formulated one, without adequate training sets the organization up for failure.

Employees and leaders need to understand clearly the organization's expectations and an individual's obligations with respect to workplace sexual harassment. Training bridges the gap between the policy and the change in the organization's attitudes towards workplace sexual harassment.



Following are some success factors for good WSH training programs:

TRAIN EVERYONE TOGETHER: Provide training to all employees, across all hierarchical levels, and across all sites. Senior leaders should participate in the training along with front-line employees. This visibility reinforces the seriousness of the policy for employees.

TRAIN EARLY, TRAIN OFTEN: Provide training during orientation to ensure new employees are clear on the organization's position regarding workplace sexual harassment and the consequences for any employee who violates the policy. Provide training more than once during the employee life cycle. Ideally, regular "booster" training should be provided to all employees and leadership to ensure continued clarity.

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TRAINING

REFLECT THE ORGANIZATION ITSELF: Focus on the realities of the organization. Include information gathered from workplace assessments. Identify situations where workplace sexual harassment is more likely to occur. Demonstrate an understanding of the role of women in the organization. Bring in data from attitude surveys about sexual harassment (both regular and anonymous). Monitoring the effectiveness of the WSH policy is important. Sharing this information with staff helps to underscore the organization's commitment to reducing WSH.

CONSIDER THE CONTEXT: The content of the training is, of course, important. Training needs to go beyond the mere existence and wording of the policy. It should also aim to raise awareness about the seriousness of WSH, and clarify misconceptions about what constitutes WSH. Employees and leaders should feel safe to ask questions about their understanding and have those questions answered in an accurate and sensitive manner.

SUPPORT GENDER EQUALITY: Training should challenge gendered organizational cultures. Studies consistently demonstrate that WSH is more prevalent in male-dominated occupations, but it is not the sex-ratio of the workplace that renders WSH more prevalent, it is the organizational environment.

Finally, in addition to the training for all employees at all levels, it's also essential to have specific training for your leaders, to ensure they are comfortable and have the skills to be successful at conflict management, communications, and managing their own emotional responses to situations involving WSH.

2

**SECONDARY PREVENTION
STRATEGIES**

Designed to respond immediately to a report of WSH, prevent further acts of WSH, and address short-term consequences. They also aim to prevent the victimization of those at risk.

Secondary intervention refer to the immediate response that should occur when an employee advises that they have been subjected to WSH. The purpose of this phase of intervention is to prevent further actions of WSH, and to deal with the short-term consequences to the complainant and to others.

Many employees are afraid to voice their concerns about WSH. They may perceive the processes to be adversarial and hostile and are concerned about a lack confidentiality, isolation from their managers or peers, retaliation, or that their concern will be ignored by management.

It is important that the organization put appropriate response processes in place. Careful consideration is needed when these processes are being developed in order to minimize employee concerns and avoid creating processes that may cause further concerns or even victimization.

Effective strategies to increase employee confidence in WSH processes require the following:

MANAGER COMPETENCE: Managers must respond appropriately to employees who come forward with complaints of WSH. Training for managers should be clear on how they are to respond to a complaint of WSH. Attempts to downplay or ignore the complaint is obviously destructive to the process. Appropriate messaging and modeling remains important even as a complaint of WSH is being addressed.

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MULTIPLE CHANNELS OF COMMUNICATION: Having more than one person to report WSH has been shown to increase reporting. Employees may be fearful approaching their manager or supervisor about a complaint so having multiple reporting channels can ease this concern and encourage more employees to report what they are experiencing.

TIMELINESS: The timeliness of investigations is vital to all parties and is seen as an important indicator of which the complaint handling process is fair to the parties.

APPROPRIATE RESPONSE: If the complaint of WSH is founded, it is important that any sanction applied is appropriate for the individual circumstances. Weak sanctions, such as the proverbial “slap on the wrist” deflect organizational responsibility for WSH and indicate a climate of tolerance for sexual harassment. The burden of identifying inappropriate workplace behaviours needs to shift from the target of the harassment to the organization itself. One way to signal this shift is for proven complaints of workplace sexual harassment to be addressed with the appropriate sanctions from management.

MEDIATION OPTIONS: The existence of an option for mediation or other informal procedures has been shown to increase employee confidence in the organization’s workplace harassment processes. This is especially the case with men who are less likely to report occurrences of WSH and who are less likely to agree to a formal process for investigation.

An example of an effective response guideline to responding to workplace harassment can be found at Safer Places NB:

https://saferplacesnb.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Safer-Places_Employer-Checklist-Guidelines_ENG_Web-Ready.pdf

3

TERTIARY INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

Tertiary interventions involve longer-term responses to deal with the consequences of the WSH. Introduced after a complaint has been received, these aim to address lasting consequences, minimize the impact of a incident, restore health and safety, and prevent further acts of WSH and victimization.

Targets of WSH have been found to experience negative psychological, health-related, and work-related consequences. These consequences range from anxiety, anger, powerlessness, depression, PTSD, decreased job satisfaction, decreased performance and engagement, and withdrawal. These are not benign results and a 2011 study suggests that the effects are long-lasting, with early career experiences having an impact on the target more than ten years later.

Despite evidence that WSH causes such as increased turnover, lower morale, absenteeism, costs of investigations and settlements, and damage to reputation, tertiary interventions have not been regularly used by employers. These interventions can be very effective and do not need to be complex.

Activities that ensure ongoing and proactive follow-up with the complainant and respondent after the close of the investigation can be helpful to monitor retaliation and ensure the behaviours do not recur. A workplace assessment (also called organizational or cultural assessments) can also be used after the close of an investigation to assess the impact of the complaint on the overall workplace, to understand the culture of the workplace, and how employees feel about the employer's attempts to address WSH.

This follow-up is also useful for monitoring the effectiveness of the organization's primary prevention and secondary intervention strategies.