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The need to speak up to harassment and the importance of mentorship

By Leonid M. Zilberman

“Not harassing women is not enough.” That’s the message in a survey conducted last week by LeanIn.org, when they found that 60 percent of male managers say that they’re uncomfortable mentoring, working one-on-one or socializing with a woman they work with. That’s a 33 percent jump from the same survey conducted last year.

Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize recipient Elie Wiesel famously said, “We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.” What happens if men don’t mentor women or engage with their opposite sex co-workers? Women are already underrepresented in many organizations, especially in law firms and at senior levels. If fewer men — who hold a large percentage of leadership positions — mentor women, fewer women will rise to leadership. As long as this imbalance remains, women continue to be at greater risk of being under-promoted, overlooked and harassed.

The reality is that bad behavior has always been unacceptable, it didn’t begin in September 2017 with Harvey Weinstein. We are just all paying more attention to it now. I suspect that most of the 60 percent of the men surveyed say that they are now afraid to mentor women or meet one-on-one because there is a “grey area” that seems to be getting bigger by the day in terms of what is acceptable behavior. That’s what many male clients tell me when we talk about eliminating sexual and gender harassment in the workplace. The truth is that professional relationships — between men and women — are not only possible, but they are important, even after the #MeToo movement. If men are afraid to mentor or meet with women, one unfortunate byproduct or unintended consequence is promotion of gender discrimination

and rise in pay equity claims. Such a mindset could take us backwards instead of forward as a society. The #MeToo movement should lead to more inclusion, not segregation. We all know that separate is not equal, by any stretch of the imagination.

Navigating today’s workplace is not about memorizing a set of rules or unacceptable behaviors. Rather, it is all about respect, empathy and inclusion. Men (and women) need to simply consider another person’s feelings when saying something or taking an action they believe could be questionable. This is not difficult. You must simply ask yourself,

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could my words or actions make my co-workers feel uncomfortable, offended or excluded? If the answer is “yes” then don’t do it or say it. What if you’ve already said or did something wrong and a co-worker told you to stop. Then stop! Be willing to apologize. This is not rocket science; it’s the type of stuff they teach 5 year olds in Kindergarten.

Almost 30 years ago, during the Clarence Thomas Supreme Court confirmation hearing, streamed on live TV, many people did not even know the definition of “sexual harassment.” Here we are, in 2019, and it’s obvious that sexual harassment is occurring at the same rate or even more. Why? Some theorize that people who are victims want the conduct to stop, but they balance that desire against the possibility of retaliation, shame and humiliation, not maintaining their position within an organization, and because they want to avoid conflict. Therefore, if an employer only has a policy against harassment and a complaint process, that may not be enough to stop harassment. In other words, to stop harassment, men do need to be mentors. But, just

don’t think that being a mentor is going to lead to anything other than a professional relationship. We need to go to lunch and have meals with people of the opposite sex, but don’t tell inappropriate jokes, while you’re sitting at the table. You can even share weekend stories with your co-workers, just know that certain topics — such as sexual encounters — are off limits and shouldn’t be discussed in the workplace, no matter who is part of the conversation. Finally, respect people’s personal space and don’t touch people, unless you know them well and have established trust.

Like Elie Wiesel said, speak up as

Full disclosure, I work at one of the largest “women-owned” law firms in Southern California. Most of the partners I work with are women. Almost all of the associates I work with — and mentor — are also women. To me, it’s not hard to work in this environment. So, what would happen if we flipped the statistics and the majority of men step up and mentor women in the workplace? I believe, as I’ve seen in my own experience, it will ultimately lead to stronger and safer workplaces for everyone.

The truth is that when more women are in leadership positions, those organizations tend to offer employees more generous policies and produce better business results — that seems to be an “open secret” in today’s business, and yet some are still slow to that realization. And when organizations employ more women, sexual harassment is less prevalent. In the end, a large part of sexual harassment (or any harassment for that matter), is a power dynamic. When we level the playing field and all speak up, we help all victims. I suspect that other men, like me, simply don’t realize that by not actively mentoring, sponsoring or speaking up for victims, that they’re inadvertently part of the problem. In the end, being a good manager or leader means offering equal access to mentorship and treating all employees in a similar fashion, which we all know leads to success by the organization.

Leonid M. Zilberman is a partner at *Wilson Turner Kosmo LLP*.



ZILBERMAN