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PERSPECTIVE

It's past time we recognize and root out 'Bro Culture' in the workplace

By Leonid M. Zilberman

Last December, Riot Games agreed to pay \$100 million dollars to settle a class action lawsuit that was brought, in part, by the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing. The gaming company was accused of tolerating a 'bro culture' in which women were subjected to sexual harassment, pay inequities and gender discrimination, as well as a constant barrage of obnoxious and toxic behavior.

One month earlier, in November 2021, Laura Schwab, the former VP of Sales and Marketing for Rivian, filed a lawsuit claiming that she was fired two days after raising concerns about a 'bro culture' with HR. Prior to her recruitment by Rivian, Schwab had 20 years of experience in the automotive industry, during which she rose to become the president of Aston-Martin. Despite her experience, she claimed that after she complained about what she perceived as gender discrimination, she was quickly marginalized by male peers, excluded from important strategy meetings and then summarily fired without good reason.

Unfortunately, there was a pattern. One year earlier, in September 2020, Alphabet – Google's parent company – reached a \$310 million settlement on a shareholder lawsuit that accused the Board of mishandling sexual misconduct by its top executives and promoting a 'bro culture.' As part of that settlement, Google agreed that its executives would not receive severance or be able to amend their stock sale plans while subject to investigations or lawsuits for sexual misconduct. The settlement also eliminated mandatory arbitration and limits Google's use of non-dis-



Traders on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange on March 3, 2020. | Photo Credit to go here

closure agreements for employees involved in these cases. Again, Google is not alone.

In December 2020, Pinterest's Former COO, Francoise Brougher, settled her gender discrimination lawsuit for \$22.5 million, two months after filing, alleging retaliation and wrongful termination. This eye-popping settlement was quickly reached to drive change away from a purported 'bro culture' and to create better opportunities for women at Pinterest. It was the largest publicly announced individual settlement in a gender discrimination case in US history.

What is the common denominator in these four recent case studies? Two words: 'Bro culture'

Bro culture isn't a new phenom-

enon, it was just called different things over the course of history, like the 'ol' boys club" or "patronage" or "cronyism." Since the beginning of capitalism, 'bro culture' has existed, especially in industries where women are under-represented. But it seems to have been amplified in the tech sector, including Silicon Valley. If you want to learn how tech innovators became 'bros' and part of the 'ruling class,' read Emily Chang's book "Brotopia: Breaking Up the Boys' Club of Silicon Valley." One of Chang's best quotes: "You may think you're Steve Jobs, but really you're Roger Ailes or Bill O'Reilly with a Bernie Sanders tattoo." One of the most headline grabbing 'bros' is former Uber CEO, Travis Kalanick, who was forced out after former U.S. Attorney

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General Eric Holder investigated Uber and found a corporate culture that belittled and denigrated women.

Recent media exposure of bro culture has made the problem feel worse, but it also speaks to the growing transparency via digital media and whistleblowing that shines a spotlight on misogynistic tendencies at start-up and tech-centered workplaces. Bro culture is being rooted out, but hasn't been stamped out. In the 50 years since the landmark *Reed v. Reed* decision by the US Supreme Court, which sought to erase institutional gender discrimination by ruling that men and women could be treated differently only when there was some reasonable and relevant cause for doing so, we need to ask ourselves whether we have really made progress or are fooling ourselves through selective observation of our social condition. *Reed v. Reed*, 404 U.S. 71 (1971).

What exactly is 'bro culture'?

'Bro culture' describes a value system that glorifies young men with obnoxious and toxic behavior. The average 'bro' tends to be a young male who places winning and success above respect for others or societal norms. 'Bros' operate in an environment of excessive partying (a motivating tool), and bullying (a right-of-passage). Harassment of colleagues is the norm and while HR policies exist, there is outright rejection of rules. A tolerance for profanity or "rough language" "locker room talk" and demeaning references to women as "girls" are a few common examples.

Regrettably, start-ups reinforce the 'bro culture' because some entrepreneurs start out in partnership with their buddies or close friends. Unsurprisingly, data from 2019 found that VC-backed start-ups were over 90% male-owned. Often, effective HR isn't a priority

and recruitment tends to center around identifying other people "like us." As a result, unconscious gender bias can unwittingly inform recruitment decisions. Without effective HR, bad seeds quickly grow. As one expert once stated: "Dudes being dudes sums up bro culture in a nutshell."

In 2022, with a heightened emphasis on diversity, equity and inclusion, it seems unthinkable how often organizational leaders do not take a close look at how they are running their business or how they are behaving. In part because friends aren't likely to criticize or disparage each other's behavior. Bro culture can exist no matter the written rules, mission or values of a company; it's about what behaviors are allowed and tolerated. If it is culturally acceptable to act poorly, without consequences, bro culture will grow and multiply.

Bro culture is bad for business – and defending employment lawsuits

Let's look at how 'bro culture' negatively affects business results. The real estate business is primed for 'bro-ism.' Last year, Irvine-based real estate technology company Remine and its CEO, Mark Schacknies, were operating in the hottest real estate market ever. Money was flowing, but Remine couldn't raise a dime and they were sold for what seemed like a fire sale. Why?

The atmosphere at Remine was bad, really bad. CEO Schacknies wrote in the company's Slack channel, which was accessible to all employees: "I must fire one person per week to live. It's my fuel." In other Remine Slack discussions, executives used expressions like "boners" and "dick pics." With digital platforms like Glassdoor and LinkedIn, exiting employees were not shy to make their feelings known: "One of the most

unprofessional environments I've been a part of."

The same is true in lawsuits where gender discrimination or harassment issues prevail. As we have all seen, nothing lasts forever, except nasty or atrocious text messages and emails. When 'bro culture' is self-evident in an organization, it leads to uncomfortable depositions from HR Managers, jaw-dropping trial exhibits and the inevitable atomic jury verdict. The good news is that it doesn't have to be that way.

What, if anything, can be done about abolishing bro culture?

If the diversity, equity and inclusion movement has taught us anything, it is that words are not enough. Respecting others in today's workplace is not about memorizing a set of rules or acceptable behaviors. Rather, it is about empathy and understanding. We all need to simply consider another person's feelings when saying something or taking an action that we believe could be questionable. Not all white men are inherently bad, and many have even seen their privilege. They need to lead the change. Women should no longer be forced to adapt to somehow exist in a toxic environment. We all have to speak up and not remain silent in the face of 'bro culture.'

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." Reaching parity in the workplace will go a long way toward displacing bro culture. Women continue to be underrepresented in many organizations at senior levels. As long as this imbalance remains, women will continue to be under-promoted, overlooked and subjected to 'bro culture.'

One way to achieve parity is for

men to be allies and invite women, specifically with respect to getting more women into technology and under-represented industries like blockchain and crypto currencies. Look at the recent crypto commercials featuring Matt Damon, Larry David and Tom Brady. Do you see any women? The answer is no.

We also need to change hiring practices. It isn't easy, but we have to get outside our comfort zone in terms of networks and affiliations and not just hire people who look and talk like us. In order to diversify, we have to recruit from different places, and hire new recruiters who know where to find diverse talent. In the end, it will make companies stronger, more competitive and achieve higher results – at least that's what all the statistical business data tells us.

Finally, we need more education in order to engage change and focus on empathy, inclusion and even behavior modification. Transparency and oversight, with zero tolerance, are the keys to eliminating a 'bro culture,' making the workplace safe and leveling the playing field for all workers. Developing a full understanding of what 'bro culture' is and where it came from will allow us to determine how best to shift away from a familiarity bias and towards real inclusion and merit-based rewards.

Presently, we continue to see an alarming rate of sexual harassment and gender discrimination cases being made against senior male managers within many leading tech companies. At the heart of the narrative, there is a strong sentiment that 'bro culture' has facilitated these disgraceful acts. Breaking down barriers to inclusion requires us all to work together to build a respectful environment where all employees are valued. Only then can we beat back on the 'bro culture' narrative and improve organizational norms.