

Media Release

AUSTRALIAN LEADERS JOIN FORCES TO END SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN THE WORKPLACE

The Male Champions of Change coalition has released a new, detailed roadmap for disrupting current ineffective systems for managing sexual harassment in the workplace. The approach argues that the prevention of sexual harassment should be a key accountability for Boards, CEOs and Executive teams – akin to their occupational health and safety responsibilities. It also recommends people who experience sexual harassment be able to tell their story in their own words, if and when they choose to.

The coalition believes it will set a new standard for all organisations across Australia and the world. Developed over the past two years, it includes a detailed guide on how to implement the proposed approach.

Founder of Male Champions of Change, Elizabeth Broderick AO says current strategies focused on compliance and managing cases have not worked for employees, organisations or the community given the well-documented persistence and prevalence of sexual harassment in Australian workplaces.

“We are saying that unless leaders take action to intervene against sexual harassment, they remain part of the culture that enables it. We are suggesting a totally new approach, that aims to eradicate this insidious and deeply harmful behaviour from organisations and our community,” said Elizabeth.

James Fazzino, Chair of Manufacturing Australia, says disrupting the system requires a major rethink on how the issue is managed.

“Up until now, sexual harassment has largely been considered as a workplace grievance process focused on resolving – usually as quietly as possible - individual cases. If you think about it instead as ensuring a physically and psychologically safe workplace for all staff, the approach you take to the issue changes significantly. Workplace occupational health and safety systems provide a good model to replicate or adapt to more effectively prevent and respond to sexual harassment,” said James.

Another system shift proposed is a new approach to balancing confidentiality and transparency in the management and reporting of sexual harassment cases. This is particularly important when allegations involve senior people who hold positions of power. The group recommends 7 principles for managing such cases in order to ensure due process, but also that:

- ◆ people impacted can talk about their experiences for their own healing and well-being if they choose (rather than being silenced).
- ◆ offenders – particularly those in positions of power – know that proven cases will not result in a quiet departure with a healthy pay-out, and;
- ◆ leaders do not prioritise power, position and financial performance over the well-being of others.

The report notes that while the devastation for those who experience sexual harassment has not changed, there has rightly been a shift in the reputational and market costs of perceived cover-ups, which are now significant.



The role of Boards is also critical according to David Atkin, outgoing CEO of Cbus:

“Creating safe workplaces has long been a key accountability for Boards. We want to see this oversight extended to include robust management of sexual harassment as a key indicator of culture, safety and leadership capability. These are all material issues for Boards to be aware of.”

Eradicating sexual harassment is about securing our talent pool and Australia cannot afford the high cost associated with inaction, according to Martin Parkinson, Chancellor of Macquarie University, Member and Director Male Champions of Change:

“For too long we have focused on managing sexual harassment as a compliance, reputational risk and legal liability issue, which has in effect, served to protect offenders and silence those impacted – mostly women, who are still such an underutilised resource in our economy. When you start to count the cost of careers derailed or lost because of sexual harassment and the cumulative impact on organisational culture and performance, leaders are compelled to lead significant change.”

Martin Bowles, National CEO of Calvary Health, says the new approach prioritises healthy cultures and long-term performance over short-term profits:

“We’ve had to make difficult decisions about the financial contribution that individuals make to our business. Taking action against a ‘money-maker’ will cost the organisation in the short-term, but the alternative is long-term harm to individuals and the corrosion of culture – which is equally, if not more costly to business.”

President of the Business Council of Australia, Tim Reed says all businesses would benefit from reading the report:

“It has never been clearer that CEOs and Boards must take the issue of workplace sexual harassment seriously. This report is both a collective stance and a practical roadmap for all businesses to consider in stamping out this destructive and unproductive behaviour. The human and productivity costs have been too high, for too long.”

Ian Silk, Chief Executive of AustralianSuper says the goal is to shift to a more transparent approach to accelerate change:

“I think there are real benefits in elevating this issue to deliver long-term positives for organisational culture and performance, and ultimately for the community.”

Inspired by the National Inquiry into Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces, led by Sex Discrimination Commissioner Kate Jenkins, the report aims to guide future approaches, practical actions and resources to disrupt current ineffective systems for managing the issue within organisations. According to Ms Jenkins, this collective approach addresses a number of recommendations from the National Inquiry and is exactly what is required to drive change.

“By openly acknowledging the prevalence of sexual harassment and taking action to address its systemic drivers, leaders have the unique power to ensure their workplaces are safe, respectful and inclusive. Their employees and the community expect no less from them,” according to Commissioner Jenkins.

The work involved consulting with people who deal with sexual harassment complaints within organisations including CEOs, Boards, human resource leaders, legal advisors and communications teams. Academics, community lawyers, federal and state human rights commissioners and other experts in the field were also engaged. Particular attention was paid to Respect@work, the findings of the National Inquiry, released in March 2020.

Resources provided in the report will include: a contemporary sexual harassment policy template; guidance on managing workplace relationships; a framework for Board reporting on the issue; simple tools to help employees recognise the many forms of sexual harassment and the range of actions or responses available to stop the behaviour



and prevent its repetition or escalation. There are also details on referral services for people who experience sexual harassment.

This work forms part of the Male Champions of Change broad and long-term mission to achieve gender equality, advance more women into leadership and build safe, respectful and inclusive environments for all. The evidence is clear that greater and more visible leadership is required to eradicate sexual harassment from workplaces. Consistent with ongoing practice, the coalition is sharing the report widely for members and other organisations to consider, adopt and/ or adapt to help accelerate change.

[Download a copy of Disrupting the System – Preventing and Responding to Sexual Harassment in the Workplace.](#)

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