ACTION STATIONS

Monica Berg wants to follow up talk of abuse with positive action. Her open-source harassment reporting tool, focused on finding solutions, is now publicly available

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I am frequently invited to take part in discussions around topics such as discrimination, harassment and workplace etiquette and I'm very grateful for the chance to voice my opinion when I have one. But lately I've often walked away feeling unsatisfied, or perhaps it's better expressed as 'wanting more'. More than once I've questioned the motivation behind these events, and asked myself: "Are we really doing this for the right reasons?"

I am a firm believer that these topics need to be addressed openly, but at the same time we need to take on the bigger picture; allow the difficult conversations and the controversial topics to be discussed in order to progress, but do so with the respect and dignity they demand.

In other words: let's not just make noise. Let's make a difference.

One of my focuses has always been the wellbeing of my team. Not just their immediate happiness, but a desire to build foundations for them to succeed in the future. Ten years ago, I convinced my then boss it was incredibly important to have company-paid gym memberships for all staff (which no one ever used) and to have cost-price beers for all (which everyone used). I was extremely proud of the first of these staff perks. It took four months of convincing and negotiation and, despite the fact that no one on the team cared, it gave me one of my biggest lessons in team management: what people want and what they need are often two very different things. A good workplace culture starts with you – your attitude, your values and, ultimately, your responsibility.

Earlier this year when we were working on our company handbook, we asked ourselves how we could best create a workplace which is positive and inclusive, but also a safe space for everyone who works there. HR with all its minefields can feel very intimidating, because these matters are outside our expertise. Eventually we did what we always do – we Googled it, identified the strengths and weaknesses, then got to work.

Zero tolerance

As a business we have zero tolerance for any form of harassment or abusive behaviour. So far, so good, but what happens if it happens? To think that it only happens to other people is naïve at best, so let's prep ourselves accordingly. Proactively building a good workplace culture is only part of the answer. Equally important is the need to create and implement systems that detect and identify problems once they happen and simultaneously make it easier for anyone who needs help to get help.

I understand too well how difficult it can be to come forward if you are in a situation where you feel 'unsafe' or uncomfortable, and I sometimes thought it would have felt so much easier if you could test the waters first and make sure you have allies within your team who will help and support you.

What we ended up doing was this: we set up an online Google form, where anyone can anonymously report incidents and, in their own words, explain the situation. The form also asks you to, if you wish, name a colleague you feel comfortable getting help from and who can act as an intermediary. Most importantly, it asks what would be the suggested solution and how what has happened can be prevented in the future. The purpose here is not to focus on the problem, but to find solutions. Sometimes making people aware of their behaviour is enough, other times it needs more work to get there. As of today, we have still not used it – but the fact that it's there does make a difference.

This process made me think that there must be a way to do this on a bigger scale, so that is what I am now trying to do. I bought the domain backofhouse.info and, together with our programmer at Unleash (https://unleash-it.co.uk), we are making it available to everyone online, as an open-source harassment reporting tool.

As a small business owner I have learned to accept help in any way, shape or form it comes, especially if it benefits my team, so for anyone in the same situation as us – where you are too small to have HR or just don't know where to start – start here. As a company you'll need to register in order to create your own form and collect responses – pretty straightforward. What you'll need to do then is inform your staff this is available to them, and commit to putting systems in place for when someone tells you something is wrong.

The form and website do not track the users, so anyone who reports a problem cannot be identified by us, as the purpose here is to help people speak up. I'm sure many will say that there are better ways to do this, and I'm sure there are, but sometimes purpose is more important than perfection.

This is a start, but if anyone can make it better, I welcome you to do so. Actually, I challenge all of us to do so. ◐