

Responding to Resistance

The purpose of this document is to provide organisations with a guide to effectively manage and respond to resistance to social change. Resistance to social change may occur in any setting for many reasons. This document focusses on resistance to social change in the context of sexual harassment and assault (SHSA).

What is resistance?

Resistance is any active pushing back against progressive programs, policies and perspectives.

Resistance to social change can often come from people with an interest in the maintenance of the status quo or existing social structures.

Forms of resistance

Denial: Denying there is a problem and blaming the victim of sexual harassment.

Disavowal: Refusing to recognise any responsibility. For example, "it's not my job to do something about it".

Inaction: Refusing to implement a change initiative. For example, "it's not a priority right now".

Appeasement: Pacifying those who are advocating for change in order to limit its impact. For example, "we can do something about sexual harassment in the next financial year".

Appropriation: Modelling change while subtly undermining it. For example, "of course we would hire more women, if they had more experience".

Co-Option: Using the language of progressive goals to be reactionary. For example, "what about men's rights? They're hiring so many other genders, there won't be any jobs left for men".

Repression: Reversing or dismantling a change initiative. For example, "we tried that once and women just didn't want to take the training".

Backlash: Aggressive response. For example, "what do they expect, you deserve what you get".

How to be prepared

The workplace is an important setting for SHSA prevention initiatives. A comprehensive strategy for eliminating SHSA needs to be implemented outlining organisational structures, practices, and policies that can prevent resistance, and show the organisation's commitment to change.

When you are introducing initiatives or working to promote gender equality and address SHSA in the workplace, it is important to be prepared and know that you are likely to encounter resistance.

There are effective response strategies for resistance, including framing, organisational, teaching and learning, and individual strategies.

Being prepared means you are less likely to become derailed when resistance occurs.



Framing strategies

Framing is how we make the case for gender equality and the elimination of SHSA in the workplace. The framing should:

- articulate the benefits and rationale for all workers;
- offer clear and compelling accounts of the problem and the solution, such as real-life stories and personal accounts from people within the organisation; and
- acknowledge that SHSA involves unequal relations of power and can happen to anyone.

Framing should directly address objections, such as male vilification, by anticipating and addressing common resistant reactions. When an organisation does this, it needs to be careful not to reinforce common misinformation or myths about SHSA. One way to avoid doing this is by leading with the fact first, before noting and debunking the myth. After, explain the misbelief and advise people about how the myth distorts facts about SHSA.

Organisational strategies

Organisational leaders are crucial for modelling appropriate behaviour. When leaders signal that they do not support or are undermining initiatives that aim to eliminate SHSA, resistance can flourish. Senior leaders must visibly step up and take action against SHSA, to build a culture of respect in the workplace.

Organisations should:

- communicate the importance of recognising unconscious bias to workers;
- encourage open debate and discussion; and
- establish clear monitoring processes to identify emerging issues with the change process.

Teaching and learning strategies

The informative materials around SHSA should be crafted specifically for those within your workplace. For instance, if a certain group is known to hold more discriminatory attitudes within an organisation they may respond to appropriately tailored resources. Using language that does not put people offside and instead brings them into the conversation as allies is important. This will help counter some of the myths and attitudes they may express which could be influencing others.

Individual strategies

There will be people who will continue to be resistant no matter what. It is important, therefore, to focus your attention on those who you can influence and set achievable goals.

Individuals may show resistance through ridiculing, withholding information, punishing, imposing shame and guilt. In recognising these strategies, you can limit their effectiveness and meet them with an appropriate response. Such a response may be a combination of asking questions, taking up space, breaking patterns, showing respect and informing.

12 steps to manage resistance

- 1. Don't be surprised.** Resistance is to be expected. Prepare for it.
- 2. Understand the form.** Resistance can take many forms. Thinking about the type of resistance will help you to respond appropriately.
- 3. Assess who it's from.** When you know who/where the resistance is coming from, you can tailor your messaging to address their concerns and/or misconceptions.
- 4. Be willing to listen.** Create space for diverse views and experiences. People need to have their say and talk about their own beliefs (and biases and fears) without being shut down. This makes them more likely to be open to other messages.
- 5. Focus efforts on those you can influence.** Understand when to respond and when to leave it alone. Find allies and focus on the 'movable middle' – those who can be influenced.
- 6. Get leaders involved.** Getting senior leadership involved makes the difference between awareness-raising and embedding change into policies, position descriptions, and performance planning.
- 7. Harness the power of your peers.** You are not alone. Find other people in your workplace with whom you can share ideas, approaches, and support.
- 8. Frame, don't shame.** Note the benefits of equality to both men and women, and address myths and misinformation.
- 9. Make sure to monitor.** Regular feedback helps you see how your work is progressing, and understand where resistance lies and what is being said.
- 10. Put guidelines in place.** Manage more extreme resistance with clear and unambiguous guidelines about what is and is not allowed.
- 11. Practice self-care.** Look after your own well-being, seek support and allow yourself space when you need it.
- 12. Celebrate success.** Truly changing organisational and structural inequalities is a marathon, not a sprint. Take time out to recognise and celebrate the wins along the way.

References

Vic Health. *(En)countering resistance Strategies to respond to resistance to gender equality initiatives 3*, QUT Evidence Review. Accessed July 2023.

<https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/Encountering-Resistance-Gender-Equality.pdf>

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