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Companies, train your board members, too

What kind of training does your company provide to its board of directors? Does your on-boarding process consist of merely providing a copy of the by-laws, a recent budget, and a request they sign a conflict of interest form? Following that, do you assume the new board member will simply slide right into their advisory roles without further training or orientation?

Board members are expected to share their knowledge, experience and expertise at board meetings. They are expected to attend meetings and sometimes contribute financially. Most times, the time and financial commitments are made clear before new board members are nominated.

But companies often overlook sharing their expectations of the board member's fiduciary and legal obligations. Board members are expected to report all potentially damaging or harmful information about operations, finances, audits, leadership, employees, consumers, volunteers, vendors, board members or other business partners of the organization.

Unfortunately, more often than not, companies fail to orient or train new board members about what to do, where to go or how to report concerns that are brought to their attention.

Think: USA Gymnastics. Scott Blackmun, CEO of the U.S. Olympic Committee, dictated that the entire USA Gymnastics board be replaced for, at first, ignoring, and later failing to take sufficiently swift action to protect the gymnasts from Larry Nassar's sexual abuse and other unlawful actions.

Blackmun said replacing the entire 21-member board of USA Gymnastics would guarantee a fresh start. "We do not base these requirements on any knowledge that any individual USAG

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staff or board members had a role in fostering or obscuring Nassar's actions," Blackmun wrote in an email. "Our position comes from a clear sense that USAG culture needs fundamental rebuilding."

According to NAVEX Global's 2018 Training Benchmark Report, based on survey responses from more than 1,200 ethics and compliance professionals globally, 65 percent of board members are not trained at all. When it comes to other top risk areas, the percent of directors who never receive training is startling: code of conduct (25 percent); workplace harassment (44 percent); cybersecurity (25 percent); conflicts of interest (23 percent); and bribery and corruption (20 percent).

Effective training

But how effective is training in reducing a business culture of harassment or sexual abuse? Dr. Eden King, an associate professor at Rice University who was interviewed by Maya Rhodan for her 2017 article published in Time said, "Learning about a law may not actually change anybody's behavior."

Ultimately, it's the factors of the training that make the difference, such as who attends, where and when the training occurs and whether the company's leadership is involved. King's research suggests that when leaders come to the training or endorse the training, people take more away from

the experience. Some have also suggested that having more women in leadership positions also helps, as the Harvard Business Review noted.

According to the EEOC's 2016 report on sexual harassment in the workplace, effective anti-harassment trainings need to be a part of a holistic, company-wide strategy to prevent it from happening. When workplaces make clear through training and leadership modeling how they expect board members, staff, volunteers, members, and business partners to be treated, culture will follow.

Everything, though, starts at the top, which is where the board members are seated, driving finances, setting the strategy, and establishing culture.

So this year when you schedule workplace harassment for your management and staff, don't forget your board of directors. Schedule a special session at an upcoming board meeting to remind members not only of their fiduciary obligations to address claims of impropriety, misconduct and wrongdoing, but also of their legal obligations.

Each board member should know when, to whom, and how to handle claims. Creating cultures of mutual respect goes a long way to prevent harm to individuals. But where there is a breakdown, board members should know how to report and help the organization not to incur corporate or personal liability.

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