

Corporate boards aren't preparing for sexual harassment and gender discrimination issues

M medium.com/@theBoardlist/corporate-boards-arent-preparing-for-sexual-harassment-and-gender-

October 26,
2017

Together with [Qualtrics](#), we've released the findings of our new survey about the actions and attitudes of Board of Directors in the wake of news reports of sexual harassment and sexism in industries across America. The survey conducted this summer had 400+ respondents who hold board positions at private and public companies of all sizes.

The survey found that the vast majority of boards (77%) **had not discussed accusations of sexually inappropriate behavior** and/or sexism in the workplace. Nearly all (88%) had not implemented a plan of action as a result of recent revelations in the media or re-evaluated the company's risks regarding sexual harassment or sexist behavior at the workplace (83%). Only a handful had discussed risks/rewards of company culture that encourages drinking or partying at work (19%). The most common reasons why board members said their boards had not addressed the issues at the board level was a perception that it was not a problem in the company; i.e that boards were simply focusing on other things or it didn't feel like a board-level issue.

Despite the majority of respondents to the survey being female and a common belief that setting right policies/tone and being an example from the top is part of a board director's duties, several respondents nevertheless said they would feel uncomfortable bringing up the topic in a board meeting. Fear and an understanding from the top that it was not a priority were reasons given by women for believing it to be an important topic but unable to bring it up.

The reason most given for not having discussed the issue was a perception that it was "not an issue", "not a focus area", or "not a concern for the company" underscoring the need for more discussions as the board level. Additional popular responses included: "just hasn't come up", "board members are men" or it wouldn't be "well received".

Venture Capital Firm- Associated Directors More Aware

Interestingly, board directors who are associated with Venture Capital firms were more likely to report that the boards on which they sit have been starting to take actions in response, possibly due to heightened scrutiny of both venture capital backed companies and venture capitalists in the digital industry in recent months. A majority (83%) of VC board members who responded said that their boards had talked about the accusations. Half (50%) reported that they were implementing plans as a result, nearly half (45%) are re-evaluating current plans in place, and nearly half (43%) have discussed appropriate behaviors around company culture (drinking, partying and sexist attitudes and behaviors). VC's have been taken to task this past year for a lack of female leadership and for having a culture that is generally largely unsupportive of diversity.

“Much work remains, but let's recognize that progress is being made.”

— Sukhinder Singh Cassidy, CEO/Founder theBoardlist

“It’s a positive development that we’re starting to see boards addressing these issues on culture and diversity, likely driven by the increased scrutiny that scandals in tech and Hollywood has spurred,” said veteran Silicon Valley CEO and founder of theBoardlist [Sukhinder Singh Cassidy](#). “Compared to public companies, private venture-backed companies are much earlier in their practices around corporate governance. For every company — public and private — issues of culture, gender equality, discrimination and harassment are now rightfully coming to the attention of company boards, and addressing these issues needs to become a standard practice, not an afterthought. This is a watershed moment for equality of women across industries, and it is our duty to help create an atmosphere of positive change. Much work remains, but let’s recognize that progress is being made.”

Many of the actions that VC board members report taking include:

- Creating formal policies and statements about conduct
- Creating reporting channels with independent or 3rd party options
- Staying away from notorious “bad actors” to be co-investors
- Getting more females into the ranks of VC’s and LP’s
- Talking to portfolio companies about implementing policies to prevent harassment