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Strategic Insights: Learning from the Military's Weinstein Moment

July 31, 2018 | Dr. Leonard Wong

In early October 2017, *The New York Times* reported multiple allegations of sexual harassment against powerful Hollywood producer, Harvey Weinstein.¹ A few days later, *The New Yorker* revealed more allegations against the movie executive to include accusations of sexual assault and rape.² After more than 80 women stepped forward to accuse Weinstein of sexual abuse, Weinstein was fired from his production company, ostracized by the film industry, and arrested and charged with rape and other offenses.

The allegations against Weinstein triggered an unexpected groundswell of women from across the country who came forward to accuse famous or powerful men of sexual misconduct. The viral reach of the subsequent #MeToo campaign resulted in the removal of scores of men in positions of power in Hollywood, journalism, politics, the judiciary, sports, and business. The flurry of activity led many commentators to conclude that it was a tipping point and a watershed moment in the nation's fight against sexual harassment.³ It was a national day of reckoning—a time when, at long last, “sexual misconduct became a fireable offense.”⁴ It was the Weinstein Moment.

Over a quarter century ago, another incident occurred that was also called a tipping point and watershed moment in the battle against sexual abuse.⁵ The location was a convention center in Las Vegas, and the event was the 35th Annual Tailhook Association Symposium. The 1991 Tailhook scandal resulted in 83 women and 7 men being sexually assaulted or molested. Ultimately, the scandal damaged the careers of 14 U.S. Navy admirals and almost 300 naval aviators. Secretary of the Navy, H. Lawrence Garrett III, and Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Frank Kelso, were both present at the convention and respectively resigned and retired early.

By many accounts, Tailhook was the military's day of reckoning concerning sexual misconduct.⁶ It was the military's Harvey Weinstein Moment as the voices of sexual abuse victims, rather than their more powerful perpetrators, were finally heard. A Weinstein Moment seeks justice in punishing those who, through rank or privilege, have avoided punishment in the past. A Weinstein Moment brings attention to the lack of accountability for those in power who use their position or office to condone sexual misconduct. However, viewing Tailhook as a Weinstein Moment also highlights that it is just the beginning of a long and arduous process of turning the tide on sexual assault.

The Tailhook scandal revealed that sexual misconduct is often an institutional issue resulting from a toxic organizational culture rather than merely errant individual misbehavior. Tailhook showed that institutions must move beyond Weinstein Moments and shift the focus from a few bad apples to developing the necessary reforms to prevent sexual abuse from occurring in the future. For the military, Tailhook—and a subsequent chastening by Congress—eventually succeeded in forcing significant reforms such as opening positions to women, establishing comprehensive sexual assault and harassment training, and creating a viable process to report sexual assault.

While the media attention that a Weinstein Moment brings certainly raises awareness of the abuse of power, it can also distract from preventing the more prevalent sexual harassment that occurs in everyday workplaces that are void of celebrities or powerful people. It is in the mundane routine of ordinary people where the risk of sexual harassment is often the greatest. A recent U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission report on harassment in the workplace delineated the risk factors that increase the probability of harassment.⁷ The risk factors include a mostly homogenous workforce, environments with significant power disparities, decentralized work locations, and a significant amount of young adult employees—a reasonably accurate description of the military’s rank and file workplace. The persistent existence of sexual harassment and assault in the military in the decades since Tailhook suggests that the main battle against sexual abuse takes place not in the rarified air of executive suites, but in the trenches of the lower levels on the organizational chart.

Finally, in the 27 years since Tailhook became the military’s Weinstein Moment, it has become obvious that sexual harassment policies and directives are of limited value if they are perceived as reluctant concessions to external political pressure. Weinstein Moments become true tipping points when actual attitudes, not just observed behaviors, change. Moreover, attitudes are best changed, not through commemorative months or the latest human resources initiative, but from the actions and reactions of leaders.

Tailhook was a humiliating, organizational failure. Nevertheless, Tailhook galvanized the military into viewing sexual misconduct as an institutional problem, rather than an isolated occurrence, a human resources concern, a public relations crisis, or just a women’s issue. As a result, the military learned that sexual assault had to be addressed in a straightforward manner while relying on leadership—not bureaucracy—as the critical asset in combating sexual misconduct. To be sure, the military will most likely never declare victory in the war against sexual abuse. But Tailhook provided the military with its Weinstein Moment and the impetus to begin its long—still unfinished—journey in changing a culture. Perhaps as the country works through its Weinstein Moment, the military’s steps and missteps in the aftermath of Tailhook can bring insight and discernment to the process.

ENDNOTES

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