



DISCUSSION GUIDE: SEXISM IN THE WORKPLACE

Date: _____ Jobsite: _____ Discussion Leader: _____

INTRODUCTION

This Sexism in the Workplace Toolkit includes a series of toolbox talks to help guide the conversation through four key areas:

- Understanding Sexism
- Risk of Sexism in Construction
- Interrupting Sexism in the Construction Workplace

This guidebook and the accompanying toolbox talks are meant to go beyond what can be legally defined as sexual harassment and address subtle acts of everyday sexism and the impact they have on the construction workplace culture. This series is not intended to replace sexual harassment and compliance training.

Similar to a safety stand-down, these toolbox talks are most effective when provided to employees in conjunction with a facilitated group discussion, either virtual via video conference or live on the job site. These toolbox talks are not meant to be distributed to employees to read on their own, sign and return.

It is important to recognize that this is not a one-time conversation, but an ongoing effort to build a more inclusive workplace. These conversations can be uncomfortable and unpredictable, so it is important to have the right framework in place before the toolbox talks are delivered. Preparing for, holding, and conducting follow-up for this conversation takes time and effort. Below are some steps for consideration when holding conversations around sexism in the construction workplace.

PREPARING FOR A CONVERSATION AROUND SEXISM

IDENTIFY PURPOSE AND GOALS

Company leaders need to have a clear understanding of what outcome they hope to achieve by having a conversation about sexism in the workplace. Often, company leaders shy away from discussing sexism out of fear of saying the wrong thing. However, having imperfect conversations is better than apathy. Employees can tell when company leaders are being authentic in their desire to learn and understand the impact sexism has on the everyday lives of their employees.

If you plan to hold conversations about sexism, sexual harassment and sex discrimination, make sure the conversations stays centered on the topic. When individuals get uncomfortable, it is human nature for them to refocus the conversation to a more comfortable topic. However, you wouldn't go to a cancer support group to talk about Alzheimer's Disease. It is not that Alzheimer's Disease doesn't matter, but it's not the purpose of that specific support group. The same theory applies to this conversation. If you are having a discussion about the impacts of sexism in the workplace, stick to the topic.

Company leaders also need to be prepared to hear what their employees have to say and to act accordingly. Leaders need to be prepared to talk about inclusion as a long-term investment that their companies are prepared to make and how it fits into their overall business strategy. Leaders should also be prepared to make reforms to their business practices and policies based on the outcome of the conversation.

IDENTIFY A FACILITATOR

The fear of a misstatement should not stop managers from broaching the conversation. Identifying the right person to lead this discussion is key to a positive and productive conversation. Some considerations when selecting a facilitator include:

- To give credibility to the conversation, the facilitator needs to be in a position of authority, ideally at the executive level or senior leadership level.
- Pick an authentic individual, and one widely perceived to be open-minded and fair-minded, to lead the discussion. The leader should also be capable of providing an opportunity for all employees to share their personal stories, including any personal experiences with either sexism or its effects.
- A good facilitator will:
 - Be impartial and objective;
 - Understand relevant terminology and model respectful and inclusive language;
 - Understand the history of sexism and current day impacts (The facilitator does not need to be an expert but having a basic understanding will help establish authenticity and encourage employees to let their guards down);
 - Acknowledge and respond to diverse perspectives and experiences; and
 - Embrace and reframe conflict (Conversations can become tense, with individuals defaulting to positions of defensiveness. Discussion leaders need to have the skills required to direct that conflict from a defensive position and into solution-seeking one).

DEVELOP A TIMELINE FOR DISCUSSION

It is up to each company to determine how to deliver the three toolbox talks and the length of time given to each one. Remember, these toolbox talks are merely meant to serve as a starting point to a sustained company-wide effort to deter sexism in the workplace.

SET GROUND RULES FOR DISCUSSION

Before the conversation begins, it is important to identify and communicate ground rules for the discussion. Setting up these parameters for the discussion can help create a safe space for individuals to share their lived experiences. Examples of ground rules to consider include:

- Reinforce the purpose of this first conversation, which is to explore, to listen and to learn from each other.
- Discuss, don't debate. Participants don't all need to agree with each other.
- Recognize and acknowledge people's individual experiences. Everyone brings their own perspective based on their own lived experiences (culture, history, practices, upbringing).
- Listen to understand, not respond.

- Speak in “I” statements, don't speak on behalf of your group (we feel) or another group's identity.
- Lean into the discomfort. Don't disengage.
- Don't assume intent. Recognize that everyone misspeaks from time to time. Ask questions to clarify someone's position.
- Do talk about impact. Acknowledge that people hear things differently based on those lived experiences.
- Allow everyone to be heard.

HOLDING SUCCESSFUL CONVERSATIONS ABOUT SEXISM

WARM-UP: MEET PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE

Talking about everyday sexism can be uncomfortable. It is important to create a safe environment for the conversation. Start by:

- Acknowledging why your company is having this conversation and what you hope both the employees and the company get out of having this conversation.
- Asking employees to think about how they are feeling about having this conversation. Does it make them uncomfortable, relieved, scared, angry, hopeful, etc.? Allow room for initial discussion about how the employees feel.

BRINGING “OUTSIDERS” INTO THE CONVERSATION

Often when talking about the impacts of sexism in the workplace, discussion leaders focus on the experiences of women, sidelining others from the conversation. This leaves some feeling like “outsiders” to the conversation and allows them to sit back and be casual observers.

But, in order for diversity, equity and inclusion efforts to be successful, companies need everyone to be active participants who challenge and educate each other. This is especially true in companies where members of one particular group hold the majority of the leadership positions, putting them in the strongest position to sustain an inclusive culture.

GUIDELINES FOR TOOLBOX TALK I: UNDERSTANDING SEXISM

This toolbox talk is meant to set the stage for discussion by ensuring everyone is working from the same set of definitions. This toolbox talk series is meant to go beyond the legal definition of sexual harassment and sex discrimination and discuss the more subtle acts of everyday sexism that can create a culture of exclusion, particularly for women.

This toolbox talk also address the industry's “macho culture” and the negative effects it has on all individuals working in construction. Use this as an opportunity to reach men who may be feeling like “outsiders” to the conversation and bring them into the conversation.

Utilize the discussion questions on the toolbox talk to allow employees time for some self-reflection. It is important to assess where people are in this conversation. Allow individuals time to reflect on their thoughts, feelings and actions. Remember, this conversation is not about shaming and blaming, but setting context to understand the past, learn from each other and make changes to be better moving forward.

GUIDELINES FOR TOOLBOX TALK 2: THE RISK OF SEXISM IN CONSTRUCTION

This toolbox talk discusses ways that a culture of sexism can infect a company. These five scenarios are meant to serve as a jumping off point for deeper conversation about the impacts of everyday sexism in the workplace. During this conversation, individuals may share their own experiences of either being the target of, or witness to, incidents of sexism.

During these discussions it is important to adopt a learner's mindset. It is common for individuals to provide an alternative explanation for the intent of the comments or actions outlined in the scenarios. This is where it is important for the discussion leader to understand intent versus impact and to center these conversations over impact. Even in the scenarios where the individual may have been well-meaning or well-intentioned, the impact on others is still destructive. It is important to remember that these discussions are not meant to shame and blame but to grow understanding and awareness.

Use the discussion questions on the toolbox talk to talk about the impact these incidents have on individuals. This is a great place to lift up voices that tend to be silenced, not by coercing individuals to share their experiences, but by creating a safe place for them to do so.

This can be a heavy conversation and some of these scenarios may trigger emotions. It is important to build into this conversation time for self-reflection and employee check-ins.

GUIDELINES FOR TOOLBOX TALK 3: INTERRUPTING SEXISM IN THE CONSTRUCTION WORKPLACE

This toolbox talk provides strategies on how employees – especially men – can be active allies against everyday sexism. It is also a good opportunity to reinforce the benefits that all diversity – including gender diversity – have on a company, team and on the individual.

It is important for the facilitator to acknowledge the reasons why a female employee might not report an incident of sexism and make sure attendees understand that silence does not mean acceptance for the behavior. Encouraging those who witness sexist behaviors to speak out is critical to future prevention and real culture change.

There are also barriers that bystanders have to intervening when they witness acts of everyday sexism. Use this toolbox talk to discuss why those barriers exist and how employees can challenge themselves to overcome those barriers and speak out. Use the scenarios in toolbox talk 2 to discuss strategies employees can use in those situations to intervene as an ally.

In addition, walk through your own company's reporting process or procedures for handling incidents of sexism. If you don't have a defined process, use this as an opportunity to announce your company's plan to create such a process – by obtaining employee buy-in and recommendations for what that process should look like.

Additional discussion questions to consider during this toolbox talk include:

1. What makes you feel included in the workplace?
2. What proactive steps can you take to establish a culture of inclusion, to prevent any acts of sexism from happening?
3. What sort of language can make a difference in tackling everyday sexism?
4. Who can individuals in the company talk to about everyday sexism?

5. Do you feel comfortable and confident using the existing systems in place to deal with formal complaints of sexual harassment or sex-based discrimination? Why or why not?

It is also important for your company leaders to clearly communicate their support for individuals coming forward to report any incidents of sexual harassment or sex-based discrimination, their commitment to investigate these incidents and take appropriate action, and that employees who report these incidents will be free from any fear of retaliation.

WRAPPING UP THE CONVERSATION

It's important to put the spotlight back on your company to identify next steps for preventing everyday sexism from infecting the workplace culture. Questions to consider include:

1. What next steps should the company prioritize going forward?
2. What should the company's leaders be aware of following this conversation?
3. Would the company benefit from an internal working group to coordinate further planning and action?

Lastly, leave the conversations on a positive note and build in some time for final thoughts and reflection. As the facilitator, be sure to extend gratitude to everyone for their participation. Potential closing discussion questions include:

1. How has this conversation impacted you? What is one word to summarize your feelings about this experience?
2. What have you learned or what is your one takeaway from the conversation?
3. Are there any actions you are inspired to take as a result of the conversation?

FOLLOW-UP AND NEXT STEPS

These discussions are a great starting point to identifying next steps but become meaningless without tangible next steps. Some suggested next steps include:

- If your company hasn't already done so, sign the Culture of CARE pledge (www.BuildCulture.org)
- Develop an incident investigation policy or procedure, similar to a safety incident response manual
- Consider the possibility of including diversity, equity & inclusion, acceptable behavior, harassment and/or Culture of CARE-specific language in subcontracts
- Create an internal working group to maintain momentum
- Update employee handbook to include diversity, equity & inclusion and/or employee behavior policies
- Consider company employee and leadership diversity goals
- Consider company supplier/subcontractor diversity goals
- Implement ongoing training and education for employees

As stated above, it is important that company leaders realize this is not a one-time discussion, but an ongoing commitment to making company-wide policy and programmatic changes. This guide is intended to help your company establish a thoughtful, impact-focused action plan for insulating the construction workplace from the effects of everyday sexism.