

HOW COMBATIVE CULTURES PREVENT MEN FROM INTERRUPTING SEXISM

And what leaders can do about it.



COMBATIVE CULTURE

A hyper-competitive workplace culture in which value is attributed to a quest to dominate others and compete for power, authority, and status.

Our research reveals a **direct link** between combative workplace cultures and men's willingness to interrupt sexism.¹

When confronted by sexist behaviour:

36% of men in **more combative** cultures report doing nothing

6% of men in **less combative** cultures report doing nothing

4 SIGNS OF A COMBATIVE CULTURE:²

- ⚠️ **Show no weakness:** The perception that showing emotion, raising doubts, or asking for advice is a sign of weakness and will not be respected.
- ⚠️ **Put work first:** The belief that work must always come first, even before personal life and family.
- ⚠️ **Strength and stamina:** The notion that characteristics such as physical size, athleticism, or ability to work long hours are tied to admiration and respect in the workplace.
- ⚠️ **Dog eat dog:** A survival-of-the-fittest mindset and the belief that everyone should advocate only for themselves and not trust others.

Relying on individual agency alone is not enough to dismantle sexism.

Companies must address their own cultures—within all levels and corners of the organization—to create an environment that empowers men to speak up.

3 STEPS LEADERS CAN TAKE:



Challenge your organizational culture:

Look deeply into organizational structures that normalize “ruthless competition” among employees and a “winner-takes-all” culture. Consider team-based rewards systems.



Look Inward:

Promote humility by admitting that you don't have all the answers. Ask lots of questions and don't make assumptions—especially that everything is okay.



Role model:

Set the tone by promoting organizational values centered on safety, respect, humanity, growth, and work-life flexibility rather than physical strength and stamina.

Learn more in our report, *Interrupting Sexism at Work: What Drives Men to Respond Directly or Do Nothing?*

SOURCES

1. Data based on a survey of 1,493 men employed full-time in the Canadian labour market and representing a diverse group, spanning industries, organizational ranks, job tenure, ages, and ethnic backgrounds. According to our survey, 46% of men work in organizations with a high level of "combative culture." Combative culture significantly predicted doing nothing in response to sexism, $b = .70$, $t(1491) = 25.88$, $p < .001$. A chi-squared analysis was conducted to test the difference in percentages. The observed values were significantly different than expected values, $X^2(1, 1493) = 210.35$, $p < .001$.
2. Jennifer L. Berdahl, Marianne Cooper, Peter Glick, Robert W. Livingston, and Joan C. Williams, "[Work as a Masculinity Contest](#)," *Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 74, no. 3 (September, 2018): p. 422-448.



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