

## Consult Australia Champions of Change

# Speech from Chair James Phillis, Chief Executive Officer, SMEC Australia New Zealand

*Delivered on 30 August 2023*

Good afternoon everyone. It's a pleasure to be here today, and thank you very much for having me.

I'd like to spend my time with you discussing what a positive duty of care, with particular focus on sexual harassment, means for leaders in the workplace.

The consequences of exclusionary behaviours, and particularly sexual harassment, are incredibly damaging, and they have been dismissed or long over-looked and under-recognised, particularly by my male colleagues. For the affected individual, and to be clear it is predominately women who are the victims here, sexual harassment can cause lifelong professional and personal damage.

I find it very hard to reconcile that this could even be happening in my organisation, and I'm sure many of you feel similar ... and yet, given the stats it would be surprising if it isn't. 1 in 5 female engineers have experienced sexual harassment at work according to a recent Professionals Australia survey.

Every single woman I have discussed this issue with in the workplace, have either been the subject of sexual harassment or have witnessed or know of someone that has. Every single one. I was going to say 'most', but the reality is it is every woman in our industry that I at least have spoken to about this. Further, it is rare to find any one woman prepared to formally speak up about the matter or make a complaint, with the common responses being "he is in a position of power" or "I don't want to risk my career" or "nothing will happen anyway".

I find this very confronting and very frustrating from the perspective that we must stop this, and we must deal with these perpetrators, but I worry and know that our "system" has not been one to support the addressing of these issues. In some cases, and I know colleagues who have done the same, I've had to decide to deal with the matter myself, outside of the "system", in order to at least remove the perpetrator from my organisation and protect others. That approach is not right, it has risks for all, and it does not enable full and proper resolution and prevention. But sometimes it just needs to be done.

So what have we done, as a Champions group?

Well, whilst there's always plenty to do, we have questioned the culture in our own workplaces. We asked our people. The most common form of disrespectful or harmful behaviour was gender-based, "everyday sexism" as it's known. Yet, we run internal reporting, and almost always we do

not see reports of sexism or sexual harassment. However we do know only 18% of those impacted make a formal complaint, the majority fearing negative consequences.

As an informed and proactive leader, it's up to me to then determine whether I am sufficiently satisfied with our reporting. As clearly, I am faced with conflicting facts. Have I created a workplace where women are encouraged to share their experiences at work? Is our culture one where women feel safe to come forth and where fellow employees (of any gender) are empowered to stand up and call out inappropriate behaviour?

This topic is incredibly complex, as our workplace culture is an amalgamation of so many individual and social cultural experiences, expectations, norms and learned behaviours. But that is no excuse. And gender inequality runs deep as learned and sometimes unconscious behaviours and social norms in almost all these experiences. Outdated messages around the role of girls and women inform our conscious and unconscious biases. And it's everywhere:

- It's messages absorbed at home from the day we are born,
- It's in schools (particularly single sex schools with limited opportunity to build healthy relationships with the opposite sex) and on footy fields (where disparaging sexist comments occur every single day),
- It's in the media (I encourage you to tune in, you find it everywhere, popular radio is for instance incredibly harmful, and the underrepresentation of women's voices in most media is significant),
- And finally, of course, it's online where we see a disproportionate trolling of women and ongoing extreme sexism.

And these are just a few examples.

It's pervasive, and so ingrained at times it's very hard for me, as a man who is generally not disadvantaged by these behaviours, to see it. Over my career, and through my many years now with Champions of Change, I have had the opportunity to reflect on both the source and impact of sexual harassment.

For those who have heard me speak before, you've likely heard that I believe the roles of senior leaders are both a privilege and a responsibility. So what is my responsibility here as we talk about a positive duty of care and a zero tolerance to sexual harassment?

It is my responsibility to be curious, to challenge assumptions, and always, to listen to and learn from women, including to consider what it would be like if their experiences of exclusion were my own. It's up to me to deeply reflect on the source of sexist behaviour in our culture – in our organisations and across the broader society - to reflect on the unconscious beliefs I may still hold, given the influences I've been exposed to - from a male breadwinner father/stay-at-home mother environment to the often-suboptimal messages around the role of girls and women I absorbed at school, in sport, amongst my mates and in the media. And that I still witness today. Every day.

I need to ask uncomfortable questions about sexual harassment in my workplace and actively listen to the responses. The data shows us that it’s so easy to dismiss or reduce the gravitas of a sexual harassment complaint – thoughts like “oh, I don’t think he really meant that” or “it was just a silly comment, let’s move on”, but in these instances it’s critical that I step out of my shoes and hear the real effects of these behaviours on the victims.

As a leader, promoting a positive duty of care, it’s up to me to be open and honest with my peers – to remind fellow leaders, managers, clients, partners and suppliers - that sexist behaviour is learned. We’re not born sexist (or racist, or homophobic and so on...), we’re mainly the product of all the experiences and influences we have over a lifetime.

But we’re also able to critically think, adjust, and adapt.

What’s learned can be unlearned, and replaced with better options, particularly when we understand the impact that discriminatory beliefs and behaviours have on our female and all our other peers.

To have a workplace culture underpinned by a positive duty of care, we must not only recognise the cause and effects of sexual harassment, and discipline incidents of it occurring, we must proactively create a culture that discourages sexual harassment.

We must create a workplace culture that cares for women and is both physically and psychologically safe. And we can only do this by challenging our behaviours, being curious and diving deeper into things like internal reports and data, and critically we must listen to and learn from those affected.

It is not enough to continue as we are and to only discipline sexual harassment incidents if or when we learn about them. A positive duty of care requires thoughtful and proactive leadership to create spaces where every individual can work free from the risk of harmful behaviour.