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HOW TO MAKE STEM SAFE FOR WOMEN – PART 2 **-- LEARNING FROM ORGANIZATIONS THAT APOLOGIZE**

I have had several opportunities to give talks on *Women in STEM* in both local and international settings. It is a common occurrence that women come up to me to share their stories of harassment. Their hurt and fear is palpable.

On some of these occasions, women seek to meet and chat with me in private. They don't want to be seen with me, by some of their male colleagues, for fear that they may think they are talking about them. They have experienced reprisals before. They have experienced the lack of empathy, lack of support, and the aggressive machinations their institution: "women in male-dominated workforces are faced with an increased likelihood of harassment (Gutek & Cohen, 1987), biases related to their leadership abilities (Bartol, 1999), and hostility if they raise concerns regarding unfair treatment (Collinson & Collinson, 1996)" (Dresden et al., 2018, p. 460).

Berdahl (2007) suggests we move "away from viewing harassers as having something uniquely wrong with them to viewing them as having something wrong with their social context. It locates the primary cause of SBH in gender hierarchy and the incentives it provides individuals to define social status based on sex" (p. 653).

What would it take for an institution to provide ethical leadership, to admit that it has been at fault, to publicly apologize?
What would it take for an institution to restructure itself as empathetic, caring, supportive and responsible for women harassed?

"Apologies are symbolic rituals performed by those who have committed offensive acts to show their regret for those acts and earn forgiveness from people who have been offended (Benoit, 2015; Goffman, 1971; Tavuchis, 1991)" (Yang & Bentley, 2017, p. 267). "(A)pologies are an effective tool for reconciliation and realignment between organizations and their constituencies" (Hirsch, 2014, p. 49). Bentley (2018) suggests that "apologies should focus on both fixing problems and rebuilding relationships" (p. 226).

Hirsch (2014, p. 50-51) notes that effective apologies contain the following elements: specificity (“strongly connected to the behavior requiring an apology”), authenticity (many apologies fail this test “by seeming to be more about the perpetrator as victim”), timeliness (more frequently “apologies come too late”), and follow through (“a credible plan to make victims whole”). Articulating “values and norms” may also be added to this list (Cels, 2017, p. 771).

An apology for complicity and a commitment to structural realignment of a STEM institution is ethically aligned with commonly stated values of STEM institutions, such as, integrity, respect, compassion, accountability, equity, diversity, inclusiveness, social responsibility. It is also ethically aligned with the Athena SWAN Charter to advance the careers of women in STEM.

Commenting on organizations with “weak or cosmetic ethics,” Pope (2018, p. 2) writes, “They are often full of phony smiles, indifference, or rudeness, despite constantly assuring us of how much they value us as employees, members, customers, clients, patients, volunteers, or supporters.” In contrast, organizations with strong ethics, “(A)n ethic of honesty, humanity, fairness, and responsibility runs through the organization” (p. 16).

References

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