



## Michael Fallon – what is acceptable behaviour?

Commendable it might be that Michael Fallon understands that as a leader he has to live to the standards he expects of others, he still doesn't "get" sexual harassment. In his interview with the BBC announcing his resignation he explains in a rather pitiful way that the *"culture has changed"* and adds *"what might have been acceptable 15, 10 years ago is clearly not acceptable now"*.

The point is, the behaviour wasn't acceptable then and never has been. All that has changed is that victims of harassment are more willing to "call" their behaviour (retrospectively at least, if not at the time).

In fact, it was just over 10 years ago that we carried out the largest ever sexual harassment survey in the UK. It so happens that the client was the Ministry of Defence. The armed services were awash with complaints of sexual harassment and doing some proper research to understand what was going on was a key part of the agreement with the then Equal Opportunities Commission to suspend its Formal Investigation.

The report, published in 2006, found inappropriate sexualised behaviour was widespread. Over 9,000 servicewomen responded to the survey and 67% had encountered, just in the last 12 months, sexualised behaviours (unwelcome comments, sending sexually explicit material, unwanted touching, through to sexual assaults).

One of the key points we had to get across was that we couldn't give them a list of proscribed behaviours – "this is acceptable, this is not". Harassment is not like that, it is subjectively defined. What one person finds offensive another person might not. Context and

power relationships are key. It is quite rightly different when the object of your attentions is a direct report or someone more junior to you.

We needed to help people see that there is a spectrum of behaviour and, at any point along that spectrum, some might define the behaviour as harassment.

Of course, sexual harassment is just one element of what we would describe as an alpha male culture. These are cultures that are typified by high internal competitiveness and outsized rewards for senior leaders. (After all, it is the alpha male silverback gorilla who gets first choice of food and mate.)

We suspect that sexual harassment is sadly widespread across industrial sectors. It is not surprising, however, that it is in very male-dominated sectors that it is at its most virulent. Parliament, of course, is a case in point.

It is not, however, something that has to be tolerated. As we know from our work with the MoD all those years ago, robust outside the chain of command reporting mechanisms can make a difference. They are necessary but insufficient. What really matters, however, is what leaders do.

Ultimately, culture is shaped by those in power. Overwhelmingly, that means men. Men have to start calling this behaviour, including the little "put downs" that are so common in corporate life. The little things matter because, drip by drip, they cause exclusion. They also betray the underlying sexist mind-set. This is not about political correctness, it is about doing the right thing.

One of the depressing things about Michael Fallon's interview with Laura Kuenssberg was his unwillingness to apologise explicitly or accept that what he had done was wrong: *"Parliament has to look at itself"* *"We've all got to look back. There are always things you regret"*. "Regret" because they have finished his ministerial career or because they were wrong?

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