

Making Uncomfortable Conversations a Habit: A New Year's Resolution Sarah Pierson

This resource sheet was created following [Sarah Pierson's presentation](#) on January 19, 2023 which was based on her book [Breaking the Silence Habit](#),

Session Summary:

Sarah Pierson explored why conversations about sexual harassment and violence are important and how these conversations work to prevent and respond to these behaviors. Sarah addressed how individuals can have these uncomfortable conversations and the framework that can help them do so. She also covered what managers can do to have these conversations.

Skills-based sexual harassment prevention and response: Consider the following questions:

- What commitments are you making in your community to have conversations about sexual violence and harassment?
- How do you engage more people in these conversations so you don't have to always be the one raising this topic?
- How do we grow the team of people who are comfortable having these conversations?

While the last five years has turned the volume up and created more opportunities to talk about sexual harassment and violence, it has also made it difficult in some ways. People are afraid of saying the wrong thing or exposing a misperception or attitude that they hold. While some people are concerned about behaviors that go unchecked, others worry that people are being judged before the facts are clear. For many reasons, opening the door to conversations about sexual harassment and violence can feel volatile.

Imagine the future we want to live in and the pathways we need to get there.

- A new culture is going to require us to develop new skills
- Culture is conversation

Therefore, every conversation leads us into the culture we want in the future and we need new skills to get there. Sarah's book lays out ways to think about sexual harassment prevention that is skills based rather than rules based. It helps us build our skills and the skills of people around us.

Uncomfortable conversations are worth having because the price of avoiding them is very high. An uncomfortable conversation is an activity we can all do and a skill we can get better at over time and master. When you think about having uncomfortable conversations, draw from your experiences of other uncomfortable things you have done that have added value to your life and know the difference between discomfort and pain. Most new things we take on feel

uncomfortable. Discomfort is not a sign that you are doing something wrong - it may be a sign that what you're doing is right!

Benefits to having uncomfortable conversations: They can benefit relationships and communities by establishing trust and confidence that you can have uncomfortable conversations together, now and in the future, and share that with others. It gives others a reference point for similar conversations and to learn from how you do it. It creates peers who are informed about the conversation.

Skills Based Sexual Harassment Prevention

1. **Start with compliance or rules, but don't end there.** Rules are important because they help hold people accountable, but we need to go beyond them.
2. **Assess experience in uncomfortable conversation.** Look at your own experience in these conversations and also think about the experiences of others and the difference in experience of those around you. Normalizing and understanding these differences can help create an organization that can be smarter about how to create skills across teams and departments.

Assess: Comfort level, estimated experience, types of conversations, audience.

3. **Learn the Uncomfortable Conversation Framework.** Take on a framework. If you don't, you will leverage one that may not be helpful for the conversation.

The Uncomfortable Conversation Framework - Any conversation that creates a world or workplace where we are supporting healthy boundaries, safety, and respect. When we don't have a framework we bring other frameworks to the conversation, such as right/wrong, good/bad, or teacher/student.

- ❖ **Know the facts.** Be open to learning and sharing facts in a conversation and apply them appropriately. Set the table for the facts we are working with here. It is not about convincing others. There are many myths and misperceptions.
- ❖ **Get uncomfortable.** Accept discomfort as part of the conversation and have the conversation anyway. How do you develop a strategy to move through the conversation instead of shutting it down when it gets uncomfortable?
- ❖ **Pause the reaction.** Think of the purpose when you pause your reaction. If you are able to pause, you can work through someone else's reaction to the conversation. Ask yourself: what am I hearing and how do I move forward?
- ❖ **Embrace practical questions.** Asking questions is sometimes a better strategy than lecturing someone if you want to convey facts. It helps you move through discomfort or unpack reactions and helps you see a topic from another perspective.

- ❖ **See the whole picture.** We are all bringing our identities into the conversation. Imagine what it feels like to be the other person in the conversation.

4. **Practice, practice, and more practice.** Like with any skill, it requires practice. **Power of practice** - You don't get better at the skills unless you practice them through conversation. The book has many examples that you could use to practice. It can help you introduce the idea of practice into your workplace on a very regular basis so that you are ready for an uncomfortable conversation the very first time it arises.

Skills developed through practice:

- Helpful intervention
- Setting boundaries
- Respecting boundaries
- Receiving feedback
- Managing conflict
- Empathy and empowerment
- Uncomf convos
- Bias and power
- Supporting survivors
- Recognizing and receiving disclosures
- Responding to disclosures

When you have these conversations preemptively as an organization or team, practicing identifies the landmines such as obstacles to reporting, distrust of HR, policies that need clarification, skills that might be lagging, or the gaps.

5. **Make uncomfortable conversations a habit.** You develop habits by doing things repeatedly and by committing to them until they become natural. When we think of the habit of uncomfortable conversations, the habit we are trying to break is the habit of silence - the habit of saying nothing when you are faced with something that is uncomfortable.

Habit formation - Develop a plan. Depending on your role, you can commit to this work in different ways: depending on your role how do you commit

- Decide whether you're building a plan as a manager or as an individual
 - HR leaders - Implement skills based sexual harassment prevention for your organization
 - Manager of a team - Implement skills based sexual harassment prevention with your own team and share approach with peers
 - Individual contributor - Learn new skills to prevent and respond to sexual harassment and start a group with peers
- Make a plan using templates from the book for ideas
- Seek support and additional resources - sarahpierson.me

For managers or leaders - How to use the book with your team to promote conversations:

Topic	Agenda	Discussion
Policy and process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Read Start Here: Why We Need More Uncomfortable Conversations at Work and Chapter I ● Review and share company policies on sexual harassments ● Review (or create) reporting flowchart ● Invite human resources to demystify reporting and policy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Are policies clear? -Which reporting pathways might people choose and why? -What are characteristics of a manager ideally suited to handle a report?
The Uncomfortable Conversation Framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Read Chapters 2-7: The Uncomfortable Conversation Framework (or access TEDxtalk) ● Conduct conversation experience assessment (online or in book) ● Remind participants about self-care practices 	Share reflections on experience assessment Reflect on The Uncomfortable Conversation Framework
Helpful intervention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Read Chapters 8 and 9 or review bystander intervention curriculum ● Present practice conversations on helpful intervention (#1 and #2 in book) 	Use practice conversation questions for discussion
Power and boundaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Read Chapter 10 ● Present practice conversions on power and boundaries (#3,#4, and #5 in book) 	Use practice conversation questions for discussion
Responding to disclosures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Read Chapter 11 	Use practice conversation

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Present practice conversations on responding to disclosures (#6 and #7 in book) 	questions for discussion Revisit policies as needed
Sexual assault awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Announce participation in a sexual assault awareness activity, such as a walk, fundraiser, or awareness day/month • Seek volunteers to organize broader participation 	What other ways can we show up for survivors of sexual assault or abuse in our midst?

Sample action steps for individuals

- ❖ Ask your manager for a copy of your organization’s sexual harassment policy
- ❖ Ask for a flow chart describing how reports of harassment are handled
- ❖ Ask a colleague who they might talk to if they experienced sexual harassment and share your own response and reasoning
- ❖ Find a local organization that helps people who have experienced sexual abuse or assault and learn about volunteer or fundraising opportunities
- ❖ Organize participation in an awareness activity or fundraiser to support survivors
- ❖ Post the numbers for sexual assault hotlines in a public place or team Slack channel
- ❖ Use a Breaking the Silence Habit question to start the conversation with colleagues in the workplace
- ❖ Ask your manager for professional development on bystander intervention or another related skill to help prevent sexual harassment
- ❖ Share a relevant blog post or resource about sexual harassment with colleagues, even if you are met with silence
- ❖ Share a workplace conversation starter video from The Uncomfortable Conversation

Every conversation that you can spark with a friend or colleague or date or stranger or boss lays down a stone on a pathway to healing that we can all walk down as a community and as society. These conversations can help those who experienced sexual harassment or abuse as well as those who want to support them.

How to help

- [Buy Sarah’s book](#) and go through the exercises
- Watch the videos on [Sarah’s YouTube channel: The Uncomfortable Conversation](#) - A nonprofit channel dedicated to normalizing conversations about sexual violence in all contexts. The content is not solely related to workplaces.
- Contact Sarah: [@sarahpiersonspeaks](#) or sarahpierson@gmail.com
- **Download the [Blank Habit Plan Template](#)**

- Download the [Habit Plan Reference Sheet](#)

Sarah Pierson (formerly Beaulieu) is the author of *Breaking the Silence Habit: A Practical Guide to Uncomfortable Conversations in the #MeToo Workplace*. She is a speaker and consultant who trains workplaces and managers on skills-based sexual harassment prevention and response. Her expertise has been featured in multiple news outlets, including Fox News, Harvard Business Review, the Associated Press, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, NPR, AskMen, and the Boston Business Journal. In 2018, Sarah, along with Russ Hammonds, co-founded *An Uncomfortable Conversation*, a nonprofit YouTube channel that helps people engage in meaningful conversations about sexual violence through short videos. A proud graduate of Brown University, Sarah lives with her family in Boston, Massachusetts.