Cisco’s experiment with radical transparency

By Claire Zillman & Emma Hinchliffe

Employee relations cases—including instances of alleged sexual harassment or bullying—can easily be considered dirty laundry at a company. Well, Cisco is doing a bit of airing out.

Last week, Cisco chief people officer Fran Kat-soudas told me about a rather novel cornerstone of the company’s effort to create a more “conscious” workplace culture.

At a company-wide meeting last January, Cisco revealed to its workforce how many employee complaints it had received of late. Its head of employment relations started by asking employees to imagine instances of unwanted touching, inappropriate behavior by a female executive, and use of the N-word, before adding: “All of these things happened here.”

Besides recalling the instances in aggregate, Cisco’s leadership “goes deep on a couple of cases,” and shares “how we handled it,” Kat-soudas said. (It’s done in a manner that does not reveal the identities of the people involved.) In extreme cases of wrongdoing, the company has a zero tolerance policy, but walking through less-severe instances of “negative behavior”—a leader speaking inappropriately to a subordinate or a supervisor overlooking the personal issues of an employee—provides an opportunity for learning, Kat-soudas said.

Cisco’s goal was to “build understanding” about the complaint process and to “make it OK” for others to speak up, Kat-soudas said. In fact, after the first presentation, the number of complaints increased, some of them years old.

Of course, San Jose-based Cisco introduced the initiative against a backdrop of employee activism in Silicon Valley, and Kat-soudas admitted that Cisco employees have become “more bold in their feedback.” I asked her how Cisco balances its desire for employee insight against the potential for worker grievances to disrupt business—the Google walkout comes to mind. Kat-soudas argues that it’s a matter of trust. “When you have trust, concerns come to the table,” if not, she said, employees pursue “external” outlets.

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