

Balancing Power Dynamics and Respecting Boundaries: HR's Role in a Post-#MeToo World



The **#MeToo** movement reshaped workplaces across Canada and around the world. What began as a cultural reckoning around sexual harassment has expanded into a broader conversation about power, consent, fairness, and boundaries in professional relationships. For HR managers, this has meant more than just updating policies – it has required a rethinking of how power operates in daily work, and how mentorship, sponsorship, and executive leadership can happen without crossing into risk.

This is especially sensitive when it comes to male executives or mentors working with female employees. While mentorship remains one of the strongest drivers of career development, many men in leadership positions have expressed hesitation or outright refusal to mentor women after **#MeToo**, fearing allegations or misinterpretations. A LeanIn.org survey found that nearly 60% of male managers were uncomfortable participating in common work activities with women, such as one-on-one meetings or business dinners, after 2018.

That reluctance is a risk in itself: if male executives avoid mentoring women, career advancement pipelines narrow and organizations risk creating a two-track system – one where men have access to sponsorship and women are left behind. HR leaders must step in to balance power dynamics, provide clear compliance guardrails, and help executives navigate mentorship responsibly.

Why Mentorship Still Matters – But Carries Risks

Every HR professional knows that mentorship is critical. Studies show that employees with strong mentors are five times more likely to receive promotions and report higher job satisfaction. For underrepresented groups, mentorship is often the difference between staying and leaving an organization.

But mentorship is inherently a power-based relationship: one person controls access to networks, opportunities, and recommendations. In a post-#MeToo world, the potential for abuse – or perceived abuse – is amplified. And just because a movement does not have as much traction nowadays doesn't mean its message is moot – in fact, addressing harassment and power dynamics in the workplace is more important now than ever. Even when no harassment occurs, the appearance of favoritism or boundary-blurring can create compliance challenges.

Example: In 2022, a Canadian tech company faced internal backlash after a senior VP was discovered to have mentored a junior employee with frequent one-on-one dinners and travel. No harassment was alleged, but coworkers perceived favoritism, leading to a harassment complaint and a costly investigation.

The lesson: it isn't always about misconduct. Sometimes, it's about how power dynamics are managed and perceived.

Understanding the Risks for Male Mentors and Executives

When male executives engage in one-on-one mentorship with female staff, the risks are real and varied:

1. Legal Risks

- **Harassment allegations:** Even unintentional boundary-crossing (comments, physical proximity, invitations outside work) can meet the threshold for workplace harassment under Canadian law.
- **Constructive dismissal claims:** If a mentee feels pressured or retaliated against after refusing advances, the employer may face wrongful dismissal liability.
- **Vicarious liability:** Employers can be held responsible for harassment committed by supervisors under most human rights codes.

2. Reputational Risks

- A single public complaint can cause significant reputational harm, especially for executives.
- Perceptions of favoritism erode trust, even if no wrongdoing occurred.

3. Cultural Risks

- Fear-driven avoidance ("I won't mentor women") reinforces gender inequality.
- Employees may see leadership as unsafe or untrustworthy, damaging engagement.

Case Examples

Case 1: Human Rights Tribunal of Ontario (2019)

A female employee alleged her manager repeatedly scheduled late-night "strategy sessions" at restaurants. While no explicit sexual propositions were made, the tribunal found that the conduct created a poisoned work environment. The employer was held liable for failing to intervene despite multiple informal complaints.

Lesson for HR: Even when conduct isn't overtly sexual, boundary-crossing in mentorship settings can meet the harassment threshold.

Case 2: The Global Banking Scandal (U.S., 2021)

A global bank faced reputational fallout when senior executives admitted avoiding mentoring women after #MeToo. Female employees documented lost promotion opportunities in a class-action suit, alleging systemic discrimination.

Lesson for HR: Avoidance creates liability too. Equal access to mentorship is a human rights issue.

Case 3: Canadian Crown Corporation (2023, reported anonymously)

An internal report revealed that executives were warned not to meet one-on-one with junior female staff. Female employees reported exclusion from key networking opportunities. The resulting investigation found gender-based systemic discrimination.

Lesson for HR: “Protective” restrictions can backfire, creating compliance exposure under federal and provincial human rights codes.

Compliance Issues for HR Managers

1. Harassment Laws

Across Canada, employers have a duty to provide a safe workplace free from harassment under provincial occupational health and safety laws and human rights codes. Harassment includes unwanted conduct that undermines dignity – not just overt sexual advances.

2. Duty to Investigate

Employers must investigate all harassment complaints, formal or informal. A poorly managed mentorship dynamic can quickly lead to a complaint requiring investigation.

3. Human Rights Compliance

Denying women access to mentorship or excluding them from networking violates gender equality protections. HR must ensure mentorship is available equitably.

4. Policy Alignment

Many organizations’ respectful workplace and conflict-of-interest policies already cover boundary issues – but policies must be updated to address mentorship explicitly.

5. Privacy and Confidentiality

Investigations into alleged misconduct must balance transparency with privacy. Mishandling disclosure can create liability on both sides.

How HR Can Set Guardrails

Build Structured Mentorship Programs

Unstructured, ad hoc mentorship increases risk. HR should establish:

- Clear program guidelines.
- Training for mentors on boundaries, power dynamics, and communication.
- Documentation of mentoring activities.
- Oversight mechanisms to monitor patterns.

Provide Compliance Training for Executives

Executives need refreshers on:

- Respectful workplace standards.
- What counts as harassment in Canada.
- How to handle social interactions, business travel, and after-hours meetings.

- Documentation of mentorship meetings (for transparency).

Normalize Safe Spaces for Mentorship

- Encourage use of open office spaces, virtual meetings, or group mentoring.
- Set expectations that mentorship doesn't require late-night dinners or travel.

Communicate Zero-Tolerance + Equal Access

- Make clear: harassment = immediate investigation.
- Equally important: avoidance of women = discrimination.

Best Practices for Male Mentors and Executives

1. **Meet in professional settings** – offices, meeting rooms, virtual platforms.
2. **Avoid exclusive after-hours or alcohol-driven settings** unless part of structured, inclusive events.
3. **Document career discussions** – notes, follow-up emails.
4. **Set clear goals for mentorship** – tie discussions to career development, not personal matters.
5. **Be transparent** – where possible, let HR know who you're mentoring.
6. **Invite inclusion** – consider group mentoring to dilute perceived favoritism.

Actionable Takeaways for HR Managers

1. **Audit existing mentorship practices** – Are women equally mentored? Are there risks of favoritism?
2. **Update policies** – Explicitly address boundaries and expectations for mentors.
3. **Provide training** – Not just on harassment, but on mentoring in a respectful, compliant way.
4. **Create safe reporting channels** – Anonymous reporting lines, ombuds options.
5. **Monitor and measure** – Track mentorship participation by gender, level, and outcomes.
6. **Respond to avoidance** – If executives are refusing to mentor women, intervene immediately to prevent systemic discrimination.

Conclusion: Building Respectful Mentorship Without Fear

In today's workplaces, power dynamics can't be ignored. Male executives and mentors still play a crucial role in developing the next generation of leaders – but they need support, guidance, and compliance guardrails to do it responsibly.

For HR managers, the challenge is twofold: protect employees from harassment **and** protect women from exclusion. That means building mentorship structures that are transparent, equitable, and safe. It means training leaders not just on what to avoid, but on how to mentor effectively in a post-#MeToo world.

The risk of doing nothing is too high. Without structured intervention, organizations face lawsuits, reputational harm, and lost talent. But done right, mentorship can remain the engine of career growth – one that is respectful, compliant, and equitable for all employees.