

2019

We Had to Do Something: Transforming the Hospitality Workplace Culture from Within

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Recommended Citation

Mooney, Shelagh K. (2019) "We Had to Do Something: Transforming the Hospitality Workplace Culture from Within," *Critical Tourism Studies Proceedings*: Vol. 2019 , Article 35.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.tru.ca/cts-proceedings/vol2019/iss1/35>

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CTS 2019

Title: We Had to Do Something: Transforming the Hospitality Workplace Culture from Within

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Abstract:

This presentation concerns an initiative by a group of concerned hospitality researchers in our university to combat what appeared to be a culture of bullying and harassment in the hospitality sector in New Zealand. The initial catalyst to action arose from two of our recent studies that revealed tolerance of abusive and exploitative practices by employers, customers and co-workers towards young workers in bars, restaurants and hotels. Three quotes from diverse participants revealed the normalisation of unacceptable behaviour in hospitality workplaces.

*He (the guest) said “f*** you...you really (are) a bitch” ... he abused me up to ten minutes and all the guests looked at me, I was so embarrassed at that time. But that is not my fault, he just abused me without reason.*

If you're new – the other commis – they will just be mean to you. Even though you're basically around the same level. Or if they're senior, they work (there) longer, they're meaner.

It was a soul-destroying place to work. Oh, it was shocking, but the owner of the venue (bar) is a terrible piece of work. After I resigned, she ignored me for two weeks. With my holiday pay, she did not pay me.

There is a considerable body of literature on the poor socialisation of new recruits in the hospitality and tourism sector (for example, Dagsland, Mykletun, & Einarsen, 2015; Mooney, 2016). However, the widespread nature and intensity of the abuse reported by our participants, which was supported by official reports on hospitality work in New Zealand (see Stringer, 2016), shocked us.

Our first action was to speak to our advisory board to see if there was interest among our industry partners to address bullying and harassment issues. There was, and based on this initial contact, we built up a list of approximately 30 enlightened employers from hospitality organisations. We named our group HARM (Say No to Harassment, Assault, Rape and Maltreatment) and have to date held three meetings. Attendance is sporadic due to the unpredictable nature of the hospitality business but to combat this reality, extensive minutes of meeting discussions and proposed actions are sent out to a rapidly increasing mailing list of interested parties and organisations. What is most important is that we have extended our reach far beyond the original interested group. Now our attendees include senior government officials from a variety of portfolios and agencies, professional association leaders, business owners, corporate human resource managers and hospitality professionals.

CTS 2019

Each meeting has resulted in a significant leap forward in our understanding of how, as an industry, we may tackle issues across a variety of forums. What has been inspiring is the broad agreement from members on the problematic aspects of hospitality organisational culture. These include what was described by one industry professional as “a culture of toxic masculinity fostered by celebrity chefs,” the absence of (any) bullying and harassment policies in establishments, poor leadership expertise and practice, and the lack of clearly defined career paths, across the sector. The presentation will focus on the knowledge we have gained, how we see our role as researchers, and the way forward for the industry to transform elements of its somewhat callous culture, one small step at a time.

Dagslan, Å.-H., Mykletun, R., & Einarsen, S. (2015). “We’re not slaves – we are actually the future!” A follow-up study of apprentices’ experiences in the Norwegian hospitality industry. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 67(4), 1–22.

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Stringer, C. (2016). Worker exploitation in New Zealand: A troubling landscape (Report). University of Auckland. Retrieved from

<https://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz/handle/2292/33065>
