ANTI-HARASSMENT INTERDEPARTMENTAL TEAM

Focus Group Report

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Executive Summary

A total of 6 focus groups (each with a duration of 3 hours) were held over the course of two weeks – with an overall attendance of 45 participants. The sessions consisted of 4 non-verbal, information-gathering activities and 22 additional discussion questions to expand upon the primary data collected from the first set of activities. Each of the focus group questions were broken down into four sections: Role and Perception, Lived Experience, Expectation of Intervention, and Vision. A full list of the questions asked is available in Appendix 1 at the end of this report.

In effort to center the experiences of those most impacted by racial and sexual harassment, as well as the compounding forms of oppressions that operate to undermine intersectional self-determination, we focused on existing groups within the City of Seattle employee structure to illuminate the narrative of harassment in the workplace. The groups selected to participate in this series of focus groups were: Coalition of Affinity Groups Against Racial Harassment, The Silence Breakers, RSJI Change Team Leads, Seattle Fire Department and Seattle Police Department, Human Resources Representatives, and the RSJI Sub-Cabinet.

Focus group participants shared an overall message that the City of Seattle workplace culture is greatly marked by a generalized sense of distrust in the effectiveness, ability, and platforms in place to provide reliable, timely, and appropriately accountable support to employees experiencing harassment. Respondents vocalized a nearly universal aversion to filing a formal report for fear of retaliation, subjection to isolation, and a lack of faith in the respective structures' willingness and capacity to respond to concerns that did not fall within a narrow constraint of the legal definition of harassment. Additionally, this sentiment was compounded by the perception that historically management, Human Resources, and the Seattle Department of Human Resources prioritize the institution over the well-being of individual employees. The participants also reported a lack in fairness which manifests as overt and structural racism, ranging from: formal investigation outcomes, career advancement opportunities, as well as personal health and safety. Employees illumined a pattern in which the few places they did manage to secure impactful support often were understaffed, under-resourced, and or also susceptible to retaliation.

Each focus group session without exception made a clear and resounding request for an independent advocate system to be implemented swiftly in order to provide confidential, timely, transparent relief and support to City of Seattle employees. They echoed the importance of being heard, that some action be taken even if not a legal one. There was also a clear call for this advocate system to provide guidance to employees as to their legal rights and the totality of options available to them if they raised concerns regarding harassment in the workplace.

- Call for Money/budget for transforming workplace culturally and lived experience, structural addressing of structural issue/racism

"We need an intersectional lens in shaping the work from the top down."-Focus Group Participant

Introduction and Background

In March of 2018, the Mayor convened an interdepartmental team (IDT), in response to complaints and concerns raised by City employees regarding racial and sexual harassment in the workplace and the inability of the City to sufficiently address the needs of its employees. The IDT consists of 21 members and draws from employees in existing affinity groups like the Coalition of Affinity Groups Against Racial Harassment, the RSJI Affiliates, and in newly formed groups like the Silence Breakers as well as labor representatives and staff from the Seattle Department of Human Resources, Seattle Office for Civil Rights (SOCR), Councilmember Teresa Mosqueda's office and the Mayor's Office. The IDT is tasked with providing recommendations to support ongoing efforts to address harassment in the workplace.

The group will provide recommendations to the Mayor and Council on three areas for change: training, the reporting process, and personnel rules; with a focus on improving the City's support of anti-harassment outcomes.

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As part of our participation in the Anti-Harassment Interdepartmental Team, the Seattle Office of Civil Rights (SOCR) engaged in two qualitative efforts. The first is a Citywide Race and Social Justice Initiative Survey, which includes questions specific to racial and sexual harassment, and the second is a series of focus groups with employee groups. The information from each effort will inform the work of the IDT as they develop their recommendations.

Methodology

In effort to center the experiences of those most impacted by racial and sexual harassment, as well as the compounding forms of oppressions that operate to undermine intersectional self-determination, we turned to focus on existing groups within the City of Seattle employee structure to illuminate the narrative of harassment in the workplace. The groups selected to participate in this series of focus groups are listed as follows: The Silence Breakers, RSJI Sub-Cabinet, Human Resources Representative, RSJI Change Team Leads, Coalition of Affinity Groups Against Racial Harassment, Seattle Fire Department, and Seattle Police Department.

Outreach/Communication

The facilitators attended previously scheduled meetings of the existing groups (The Silence Breakers, Race and Social Justice Initiative (RSJI) Sub-Cabinet, Anti-Harassment Interdepartmental Team (IDT) –to gauge willingness to participate, how to best frame the experience and to better understand examples of harassment beyond the legal definition.

[To be completed: Confirmed with IDT the key groups to include in focus groups

Located e-mail domains, word of mouth, attending meetings, individual meetings, connecting with folks that were actively in the process of navigating workplace harassment/reaching out to SOCR for support]

The duration of each focus group session was 3 hours – capturing City employees' experiences with workplace harassment and discrimination, perceptions of past interventions, as well as feedback in guiding the development of a set of recommendations. Including an introduction to the context of the qualitative data-driven focus groups series and a closing detailing next steps for the information gathered as a result of the process, the focus group sessions consisted of four sections: Role and Perception, Lived Experience, Expectations of Interventions, and Visioning.

Due to concerns around informational containment and confidentiality brought by City of Seattle employees before the focus group sessions began, there were several non-verbal activities to capture data points. In order to gather first account experiences as accurately as possible, participants were provided notecards and instructed to write responses to any and all prompts in addition to sharing verbally during the focus groups.

To provide a general working example set of harassment, facilitators conferred with the RSJI Sub-Cabinet and members of the SOCR team. The examples complied and shared with focus group participants are as follows:

> **Working Examples of Harassment:**
>
> *Dread, fear, explicit threats, being picked on, being targeted based on a protected or other marginalized group, being overly scrutinized, having someone actively opposes or be hostile to you or your work, feeling as though you are being pushed out, intentionally embarrassed, having your experiences or voice erased, making it seem as though the things you do or your work is unimportant, being isolated from your co-workers/peers, having a person in power unexpectedly question your ability, socio-economic status jokes, discrediting your knowledge and/or expertise, yelling and bullying.*

Focus Groups

The focus group questions were broken down into four sections: Role and Perception, Lived Experience, Expectation of Intervention and Vision. A full list of the question asked is available in Appendix 1 at the end of this report.

The Role and Perception section focused on the perceived roles and general understand of existing supports that an employee might turn to if they would experience harassment or consider seeking support. The Lived Experience section turned towards actual lived experience or witnessing of others in making a formal complaint or filing a claim based on experiences of harassment. The participants were asked a series questions about their experiences, how they think their background, culture and/or identities impacted their ability to receive support, who they are most likely to reach out to when seeking a formal intervention. Questions about barriers they may have experienced while trying to report experiences of harassment and how fear of retaliation factors into their willingness to make a report.

The Expectations of Interventions section asked the participants to share how they would like previously identified support structures within the City of Seattle to intervene in the event of harassment in the workplace, as well as what type of City of Seattle-Provided Anti-Harassment training they would like to be made available. Facilitators asked participants about their experiences with management, Human Resources

(HR), Seattle Department of Human Resources (SDHR), Seattle Office of Civil Rights (SOCR) and their coworkers. The participants were also given index cards, and instructed to write a short response detailing the response they would expect if they were to make a formal report with respect to three factors:

1. Duration- how long the process should take
2. Communication-how would you like to be communicated to and by whom
3. Protection from retaliation

The participants were then asked to respond verbally to two questions to regarding trainings received as City employees and the impact of said trainings on the prevention of harassment in the workplace.

In the final section the participants were asked to what they would like the Executive to know about their experiences of harassment as well as to describe how they would like to ideally receive support in the event of experiencing harassment in the workplace, without the limit or concern of feasibility.

Findings

Management/Supervisor

Perceptions of support available depends on your manager- People's perceptions of support depend greatly on who their manager is.

"When your leadership is the issue, you don't have anywhere else to go." -Focus Group Participant

Abuse of Power-We heard many stories of management and other leadership at the City of Seattle abusing their power

Fear of retaliation- People experienced significant fear of retaliation from their manager/supervisor including the perception from management that people who file reports are "troublemakers." One focus group participant said, "I see this all the time, when the perpetrator is your boss. Silent retaliation, it's not legal but a subtle retaliation."

Accountability-There were strong calls for accountability from all levels of leadership from management to the Mayor and City Council. This included many requests for 360 evaluations.

"If there's someone above you that you can't trust, you don't go above them. Where do you turn to when a superior is in question?"- Focus Group Participant

Lack of Trust- People don't trust that their managers will appropriately handle when experiences of harassment are brought to them

Lack of support and training for managers- Even when managers wanted to be supportive participants observed that management often lacks the skill, support and/or training to appropriately respond to harassment concerns.

Lack of Appropriate Response- There were a wide range of responses from management when experiences of harassment were brought to them including defensiveness, resistance to investigating or lack of follow up about the incident.

Lack of consistency

Differential Treatment for People of Color-Participants expressed concerns about discrimination and racial harassment including:

- Racial Harassment perpetuated by white managers
  - A Black female focus group participant shared about a time that her manager told her that she couldn't remember her name and instead gave her the nickname of another black women she used to know. Another Black focus group participant shared a story about a time when her manager got up in her face and started yelling at her in front of other people. No one said anything including the department director who was there when it happened.

  - Lack of opportunities or active suppression of people of color that results in less opportunities for people or color to advance into leadership positions as well as lack of support for managers of color.

"They, African-American supervisors, have no support. Whoever is above you is going to make sure you don't succeed. There's nowhere for them to go."- Focus Group Participant

Executive Authority

People would like their Managers to:

- to not be reactive, but to be open
- lead from the front
- Be fair and accountable
- Follow through
- Cultivating the leadership of younger employees
- Cultivate mutual trust
- Champion employees

Seattle Office for Civil Rights (SOCR)

Investigations- Participants who had received support from SOCR had a range of experiences. Some participants felt that nothing would happen or had heard from others that when they reached out to SOCR there wasn't any follow-through. While other participants who had worked directly with SOCR after reporting claims of harassment felt that SOCR did a good job thoroughly investigating their claims.

"They tried to get direct feedback. SOCR dug a lot more than HR did." -Focus Group Participant

Legal Limitations-Several participants spoke to their perception that the kinds of issues that SOCR could address were limited and based on narrow legal definitions of harassment and discrimination

"Even when they [SOCR] come, there's nothing they can do. Most of what people experience probably doesn't rise to that level but definitely something we need to do something about." – Focus Group Participant

Lack of familiarity- Many participants said that they simply weren't familiar with SOCR. They didn't have negative or positive experiences rather they expressed a confusion about what role SOCR may play for City employees experiencing harassment. For the people who were familiar with SOCR there was a sense that 1) if you did have an experience of harassment or discrimination that met the legal definition and was under the forms of discrimination that SOCR has the purview over and 2) you reached out to SOCR that had positive experiences

Under resourced- For the people who were familiar with SOCR and/or had reached out to SOCR to report an experience of harassment there was a perception that as long as their claim was within the scope that SOCR could investigate people had positive experiences but felt that SOCR was under staffed and resourced. One participant said, "the city isn't actually giving them the resources to support people. They don't have time. There's like 7 of them. They definitely need more resources. They don't have the resources at this time."

Independence- Some participants expressed concerns that SOCR may not have the autonomy and independence to fully address the harassment and discrimination concerns they receive. Several participants expressed the need for an independent SOCR.

Leadership-Participants spoke to the fact that their experiences of SOCR over the years was greatly impact by who the director is

When experiencing harassment participants wanted SOCR to:
- Believe me
- Explain clearly
- Hold people accountable for behavior
- "Don't let the City system railroad me. Help me."
- Assume best intention
- Advocate for the employee
- [re: SOCR] Be Independent! Seek Justice! Make Change!
- Ask fact finding questions to help draw of the employee's perspectives.
- Not to be so cold and clinical during the "intake process"
- If serious, move offender while incident is investigated
- make certain that employees understand limits of their ability to address issues
- make referrals to other who can help when the claim does not meet the legal definition of harassment or discrimination
- Be confidential
- Be accountable
- Take action on behalf of employees

Human Resources (HR) and Seattle Department of Human Resources (SDHR)
Participants want HR to:

- Listen with empathy and concern
- Provide emotion support
- Be efficient
- Take action
- Follow-up in a timely way after the investigation
- Provide clarity about the process, be transparent
- Do an unbiased investigation

"You need to bring the human to human resources. You can't keep punishing people if you don't give them the tools to thrive."
– Focus Group Participant

- Offer avenues of support
- Provide options
- Take employee concerns seriously
- Facilitate the process
- Look for patterns of abuse

Concerns Included:
- **Lack of Clarity**
    - **Confusion about the difference between HR and SDHR**
    - Challenges navigating between HR and SDHR
    - Lack of clarity about what is the role and scope of each entity
    - "When my HR department was hostile I went to SDHR and told them my situation and they could not help me because they had no connection with my department's HR."
    - "They [HR] don't give you the information." [re: reporting process]
- **Lack of trust** – "I have no faith in them [SDHR]"
- **Lack of confidentiality**- many people spoke to instances where they reached out to HR about their harassment concerns and then their concerns were shared with their manager. A number of people said that they experienced retaliation from their manager when this happened
    - "HR is not very helpful. Confidentiality is a huge problem. Our department is very small, and they don't have a great grasp on confidentiality."
- **Lack of Resolution**- Participants brought concerns to HR only to either never hear from HR again or expressed that there were never any results or action taken based on their harassment claim
- **Lack of Urgency**- Participants expressed concerns about receiving timely communication follow-up and resolution of claims. One focus group participant said, "they're [HR] super busy, why report it." Which was then echoes empathetically (through nodes and verbal expressions such as "yes and " uh huh.") throughout the room.
    - **Fear of Retaliation**
        - "There's gonna be back fall if you approach HR."
        - "They [SDHR] gather information to intimidate the work environment not to report."
        - Can't address it [harassment] when they're above HR ▯ it's dangerous
    - **Workplace culture**-We talked to staff who both worked within HR and SDHR who expressed serious concerns about the culture of their workplaces
    - **Racism**-Participants talked both about the perception that HR is not designed to support employees of color. Participants of color also shared about a pattern of differential and racist treatment they experienced

"It's a cycle. They have a structure. They don't want to help us. It's a culture that is just festered against black men, women. HR is not here to help most people of color."- Focus group participant

Structural Challenges-

- Concern that they can only take action based on narrow (legal) definitions of harassment and discrimination
- A sense that these polices are overly strict and don't allow for nuance or variance in individual experiences
- The perception that HR/SDHR is only interested in protecting the City (as an institution) rather than advocating for employees

Training-Participants expressed the need for more training, resources and support for HR staff to build more skills to better support the employees who reach out to them for help. One participant said. "[I would like] Everyone [to be] trained enough to response w/ empathy and desire to help employee. Make sure they have experts that they can consult with. Make sure they stay connected and follow-up with employees and to share results of whatever investigation is done whether internally or externally. Don't leave employee hanging out there wondering if anything was done."

Bystander/witness/coworkers

In regard to the role that co-workers hold when a fellow City of Seattle employee experiences harassment in the workplace, the focus group respondents stressed the significance of mutual, empathetic support from co-workers. While helpful in navigating harassment, the scope is limited generally to emotional support. They also shared that a lack of trust between coworkers, not being able to trust each other in discussing experiences also negatively impacts the workplace capacity.

Advocate/Ombuds/ Support

Strong calls for an advocate who would:

- Advocate for employees
- Be independent (of the executive)
- Address concerns that employees have that may not rise to the level of a full investigation
- Offer support
- Be trauma informed
- Follow-up with employees throughout the process
- Offer confidential support (is not a mandatory reporter)
- Listen with empathy
- Engage in harm reduction
- Participants asked for a single point of contact who "keeps me regularly updated and can completely respond to my questions"
- Help to hold leadership accountable

Reporting

There is a lack of structure and standardization of skills to facilitate the reporting process in a supportive and emphatic way. Also present, is a fear of retaliation and lack of confidentiality that has espoused enough fear in so that focus groups participants would not file a report or seek formal intervention.

Q: "Would you be comfortable seeking support from the following places?"
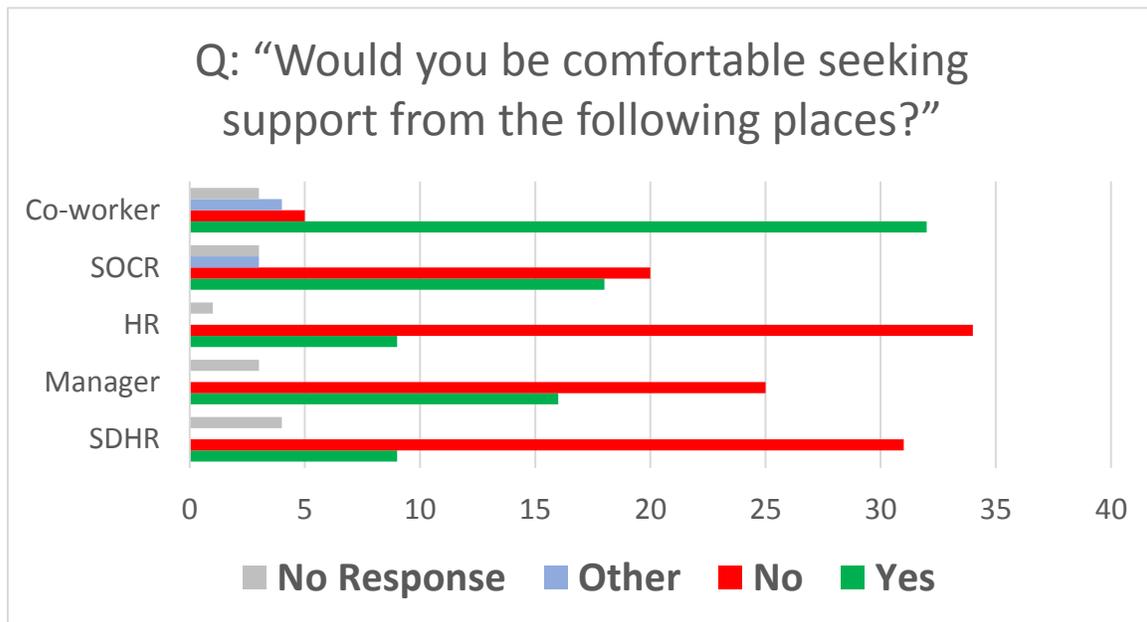
There was an expressed need for an independent, confidential body that is not mandated to report findings, to provide clarity in the reporting process regarding the different reporting bodies, the corresponding procedural steps to each, what information would be collected, the intended use of said information, as well as what to expect from the different reporting options.

Respondents also voiced a concern for leadership's role in the reporting process – asking where leadership could turn if they needed to make a report, and how they could support staff in taking formal intervention.

"I would quit rather than do a formal intervention." -Focus Group Participant

Investigation

Supportive SOCR- For the participants who went through investigations people had the most positive experiences with SOCR

Legal definitions too narrow

Lack of Resolution- Nearly every participant who shared an experience of harassment felt as though there was not an appropriate resolution to their concerns.

- For many participants there was no resolution or follow-up at all

Communication and Timeframe- Participants had a sense of urgency and overwhelmingly felt like the process took too long

- Many participants filed claims only to go weeks or even months without hearing any update on if/when an investigation would be conducted

Disproportionate impact to person making the report- Several participants talked about the fact that it is often the person making the report who has to leave and the person the harassment claim is against is not impacted

- There were several requests for policies that would require the accused rather than the complainant to take leave or move departments

Need for Confidentiality

Need for Consistency

Centering Racial Equity

Training

In Person Training

Specific Training for Leadership

Different Experiences in Training over time- Several longtime employees expressed that they used to receive good in person training but that the current anti-harassment training is insufficient

Participants asked for trainings that are:

- Interactive

- Customized for different departments and roles

- Include information about protections from retaliation

- Multiple doses- not just one time training

- Center racial equity

- Address larger issues of workplace culture and inequality

- Includes examples of prevention and intervention models

- Offer practical skill building

- Mandatory for ALL employees

Retaliation

Participants expressed significant fear of retaliation across all of the reporting entities currently available to them. Participants were most afraid of retaliation from management. Participants had the least fear of retaliation when reporting to the Office of Civil Rights.
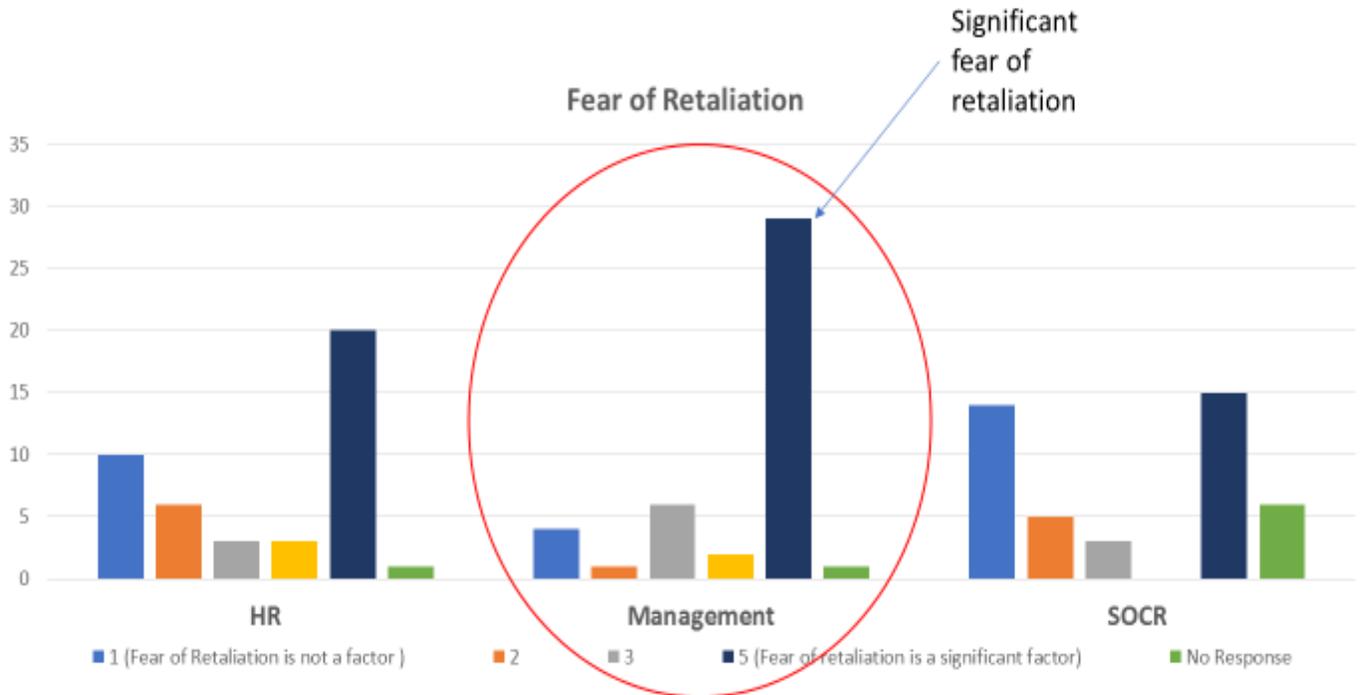
Background/Identity/Culture

- Racial Harassment was a constant theme throughout all of the focus groups

- Participants experienced both overt and structural racism

- When experiencing racial harassment the majority of employee turned to their peer networks for support

- Participants of color have been working on this issue for decades

- Explicit targeting of Black and African American employees
  - Black women being pushed out or seen as "trouble makers" by white leadership

- Differential treatment for people of color including:
  - Racial harassment being perpetuated by white managers
  - Lack of opportunities for people of color
    - Permanent and special out of class positions not being offered to people of color

"The system corrects itself to racism." – Focus Group Participant

- - Active suppression of people of color that results in less opportunities for people of color to advance into leadership positions
  - Lack of support for managers of color

Resolution/ Outcome
- Overwhelmingly participants spoke both a lack of response to their experiences of harassment

- The majority of participants who reported harassment felt that there was no resolution to their concern

- The primary way that participants dealt with experiences of harassment was to talk to co-workers and/or do nothing

- There were concerns about settlements requiring complainant not to talk about the incident

- Lack of racial equity

Other Findings
There were some additional findings from the focus groups that fell outside the scope of our work. A number of participants spoke about the intersection of harassment and unions. Participants who were represented by a union generally had positive experiences with their union when trying to seek support about workplace harassment. Several participants spoke to their observation that when they got their union involved their harassment complain was taken more seriously.

We held a focus group with employees of the Police and Fire departments. The majority of the feedback from employees in the Police and Fire Departments strongly reflected what we heard from the other 6 focus groups. The primary difference is that the employees from the Seattle Police Department said that they experienced a sense of tension between their department and the Office of Civil Rights and sighted issues such as lack of communication and trust between the departments.

Finally, while it only came up in one focus group and we did not ask any questions about mentorship several participants had requests that the City implement some kind of mentorship programs for employees to help foster the leadership of younger employees and employees of color.

Conclusion

Acknowledgments

[insert acknowledgement of this history of this work]

Focus Group Questions

Section 1 – Role and Perception

1. ACTIVITY #1 Comfort in Seeking Support- Sticker Activity
   a. Would you be comfortable seeking support from the following places?
      i. Management, HR, SDHR, SOCR, co-workers
      ii. Green=yes red=no
   b. What characteristics contribute to your willingness in seeking support from the groups listed?

2. Even if you haven't interacted with each of the groups listed, what is your perception of **HR's** ability to provide support to people who have experienced harassment?
   a. What is your perception of **SDHR's** ability to provide support to people who have experienced harassment?
   b. What is your perception of **SOCR's** ability to provide support to people who have experienced harassment?
   c. What is your perception of your **co-worker's** ability to provide support to people who have experienced harassment?

Section 2 – Lived Experience

1. If you've spoken with a manager or filed a report with HR/SDHR/SOCR, what was that experience like for you?

2. From your experience, what role if any do you believe your background, culture, and/or identities played in your receiving support?

3. If you have reached out to more than one place to address your concerns were their differences in your experiences? If so, how did your experiences differ from Management, HR, SDHR to SOCR?

4. Who are you most likely to reach out to when seeking a formal intervention? And why?

5. Have you experienced any barriers while trying to report an experience of harassment?

6. ACTIVITY #2 – Retaliation Concerns- On a scale of 1-5 how much did fear of retaliation factor into your willingness to make a report?

Section 3 – Expectations of Interventions

1. ACTIVITY #3- Preferred Responses
    a. How would you like Management/HR/SDHR/SOCR/coworkers to respond if you brought an experience of harassment to their attention?

    b. Would anyone like elaborate on any of these responses?

2. ACTIVITY #4 (on an index card write a short response to each of the following)
    a. If you were to file a complained about harassment you experienced what would you need regarding:
        i. Duration- how long the process should take
        ii. Communication-how would you like to be communicated to and by whom?
        iii. Protection from retaliation

3. There have been calls for more anti-harassment training:
        i. Have you participated in any of the city's anti-harassment trainings?
        ii. If so, what was your experience?
        iii. If the city were to offer more training how would you recommend they proceed? How many? How long? What type?

Question 4 – Visioning

1. What would it look like for you to receive support in navigating harassment in the workplace?

2. If you could tell the Mayor anything about your experiences of harassment while working at the City of Seattle, what would it be?