

in the final analysis

“If you see harassment happening, speak up. Being harassed is terrible; having bystanders pretend they don’t notice is infinitely worse.”

—Celeste Ng

Oftentimes when I write In the Final Analysis, I worry that my premises, references, and word play may be too “American” for many readers. Relevant topic selection is another challenge in addressing a global audience. Is there anything about which I could write that would be meaningful to our worldwide reader base? Not many things: perhaps such universals as the importance of professional integrity in science and engineering, the value of mentorship, the power of innovation in problem solving, the criticality of resource optimization, and, unfortunately, the need to be more proactive in acting to prevent harassment in the community.

The emergence of the “Me Too” movement almost two years ago brought light to long-hidden harassment issues, partly via social media and partly by the number of famous people being revealed as having behaved in repulsive ways in the shadows of what had been illustrious careers. The perturbation was global. For example, Wikipedia states that the social media hashtag #MeToo trended in at least 85 countries and in many languages. Harassment knows no international boundaries.

The association community also knows no international boundaries. Indeed, we in the association field work to erase boundaries. Within TMS, we host thousands of people from dozens of countries at events where attendees almost universally comport themselves with professionalism, curiosity, enthusiasm, consideration, and mutual respect. There can be times, however, when someone crosses a line—saying, doing, or presenting something that others experience as harassing. Perhaps an attendee is not the focus of the bad behavior him or herself, but witnesses it. Within TMS, we have created mechanisms to address harassment situations, and we are committed to act quickly when made aware that there is an incident.

Last year, TMS participated in a multi-society initiative to advance professional and ethical conduct, climate, and culture in the science, technology, engineering, medicine, and mathematics (STEMM) areas. This led to the 2019 creation of the Societies Consortium on Sexual Harassment in STEMM. TMS is a member. The consortium “will help societies fulfill their roles as standard bearers and standard setters for science (natural, social, and behavioral), technology, engineering, mathematics, and medical (STEMM) fields, by producing impactful resources and guidance to address sexual harassment, in all of its forms, in societies’ own operations and broadly in STEMM fields.” I anticipate that the consortium’s work will help drain the safe harbors for harassers.

As we engaged with the consortium, we also undertook to develop the TMS Meetings Code of Conduct, which attendees of future TMS meetings will be required to acknowledge and accept when attending our events. It says, in part, “TMS is committed to providing a safe, inclusive, and welcoming environment and an experience that embraces the richness of diversity where all participants may exchange ideas, learn, network, and socialize in the company of colleagues in an environment of mutual respect. TMS does not tolerate harassment in any form and requires all participants to abide by the TMS Anti-Harassment Policy and Meetings Code of Conduct in all venues, including ancillary events and social gatherings.” The code describes expected behavior by event participants, characterizes unacceptable behavior, outlines consequences of bad behavior, and references the processes that TMS will employ when handling reports of unacceptable behavior.

The thumbnail version: treat each other with respect; if you experience harassment or see someone being harassed, tell us; we will work hard to investigate promptly and fairly. If someone is a bad actor, the behavior will have to change immediately or he or she will be removed from the event and potentially denied access to future ones.

Harassment is terrible, and TMS refuses to be a passive bystander when it happens.

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