

The most important work of my life has been to support and empower women. I've tried to do so here at home, around the world, and in the organizations I've run. I started in my twenties, and four decades later I'm nowhere near being done. I'm proud that it's the work I'm most associated with, and it remains what I'm most dedicated to.

So I very much understand the question I'm being asked as to why I let an employee on my 2008 campaign keep his job despite his inappropriate workplace behavior.

The short answer is this: If I had it to do again, I wouldn't.

Before giving some of the reasons why I made a different choice back then and why looking back I wish I'd done it differently, here's what happened and what my thinking was at the time.

In 2007, a woman working on my campaign came forward with a complaint about her supervisor behaving inappropriately toward her. She and her complaint were taken seriously. Senior campaign staff and legal counsel spoke to both her and the offender. They determined that he had in fact engaged in inappropriate behavior. My then-campaign manager presented me with her findings. She recommended that he be fired. I asked for steps that could be taken short of termination. In the end, I decided to demote him, docking his pay; separate him from the woman; assign her to work directly for my then-deputy-campaign manager; put in place technical barriers to his emailing her; and require that he seek counseling. He would also be warned that any subsequent harassment of any kind toward anyone would result in immediate termination.

I did this because I didn't think firing him was the best solution to the problem. He needed to be punished, change his behavior, and understand why his actions were wrong. The young woman needed to be able to thrive and feel safe. I thought both could happen without him losing his job. I believed the punishment was severe and the message to him unambiguous.

I also believe in second chances. I've been given second chances and I have given them to others. I want to continue to believe in them. But sometimes they're squandered. In this case, while there were no further complaints against him for the duration of the campaign, several years after working for me he was terminated from another job for inappropriate behavior. That reoccurrence troubles me greatly, and it alone makes clear that the lesson I hoped he had learned while working for me went unheeded. Would he have done better – been better – if I had fired him? Would he have gotten that next job? There is no way I can go

back 10 years and know the answers. But you can bet I'm asking myself these questions right now.

Over the years, I have made, directly and indirectly, thousands of personnel decisions – everything from hiring to promoting to disciplining to firing. Most of these decisions worked out well. But I've gotten some wrong: I've hired the wrong people for the wrong jobs; I've come down on people too hard at times. Through it all, I've always taken firing very seriously. Taking away someone's livelihood is perhaps the most serious thing an employer can do. When faced with a situation like this, if I think it's possible to avoid termination while still doing right by everyone involved, I am inclined in that direction. I do not put this forward as a virtue or a vice – just as a fact about how I view these matters.

When The New York Times reported on this incident last week, my first thought was for the young woman involved. So I reached out to her – most importantly, to see how she was doing, but also to help me reflect on my decision and its consequences. It's never easy when something painful or personal like this surfaces, much less when it appears all over the news. I called her not knowing what I'd hear. Whatever she had to say, I wanted her to be able to say it, and say it to me.

She expressed appreciation that she worked on a campaign where she knew she could come forward without fear. She was glad that her accusations were taken seriously, that there was a clear process in place for dealing with harassment, and that it was followed. Most importantly, she told me that for the remainder of the campaign, she flourished in her new role. We talked about her career, policy issues related to the work she's doing now, and her commitment to public service. I told her how grateful I was to her for working on my campaign and believing in me as a candidate. She's read every word of this and has given me permission to share it.

It was reassuring to hear that she felt supported back then – and that all these years later, those feelings haven't changed. That again left me glad that my campaign had in place a comprehensive process for dealing with complaints. The fact that the woman involved felt heard and supported reinforced my belief that the process worked – at least to a degree. At the time, I believed the punishment I imposed was severe and fit the offense. Indeed, while we are revisiting whether my decision from a decade ago was harsh enough, many employers would be well served to take actions at least as severe when confronted with problems now – including the very media outlet that broke this story. They recently opted to suspend and reinstate one of their journalists who exhibited similarly

inappropriate behavior, rather than terminate him. A decade from now, that decision may not look as tough as it feels today. The norms around sexual harassment will likely have continued to change as swiftly and significantly in the years to come as they have over the years until now.

Over the past year, a seismic shift has occurred in the way we approach and respond to sexual harassment, both as a society and as individuals. This shift was long overdue. It occurred thanks to women across industries who stood up and spoke out, from Hollywood to sports to farm workers – to the very woman who worked for me.

For most of my life, harassment wasn't something talked about or even acknowledged. More women than not experience it to some degree in their life, and until recently, the response was often to laugh it off or tough it out. That's changing, and that's a good thing. My own decision to write in my memoir about my experiences being sexually harassed and physically threatened early in my career – the first time was in college – was more agonizing than it should have been. I know that I'm one of the lucky ones, and what happened to me seemed so commonplace that I wondered if it was even worth sharing. But in the end, that's exactly why I chose to write about it: because I don't want this behavior or these attitudes to be accepted as “normal” for any woman, especially those just starting out in their lives.

No woman should have to endure harassment or assault – at work, at school, or anywhere. And men are now on notice that they will truly be held accountable for their actions. Especially now, we all need to be thinking about the complexities of sexual harassment, and be willing to challenge ourselves to reassess and question our own views.

In other words, everyone's now on their second chance, both the offenders and the decision-makers. Let's do our best to make the most of it.

We can't go back, but we can certainly look back, informed by the present. We can acknowledge that even those of us who have spent much of our life thinking about gender issues and who have firsthand experiences of navigating a male-dominated industry or career may not always get it right.

I recognize that the situation on my 2008 campaign was unusual in that a woman complained to a woman who brought the issue to a woman who was the ultimate decision maker. There was no man in the chain of command. The boss was a woman. Does a woman have a responsibility to come down even harder on the perpetrator? I don't know. But I do

believe that a woman boss has an extra responsibility to look out for the women who work for her, and to better understand how issues like these can affect them.

I was inspired by my conversation with this young woman to express my own thinking on the matter. You may question why it's taken me time to speak on this at length. The answer is simple: I've been grappling with this and thinking about how best to share my thoughts. I hope that my doing so will push others to keep having this conversation – to ask and try to answer the hard questions, not just in the abstract but in the real-life contexts of our roles as men, women, bosses, employees, advocates, and public officials. I hope that women will continue to talk and write about their own experiences and that they will continue leading this critical debate, which, done right, will lead to a better, fairer, safer country for us all.