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I'm Dr. Julia Shaw, a research associate at University College London, and the cofounder of Spot. Spot is a tool that helps organizations tackle harassment and discrimination with better reporting options and better training. And in 2019, along with Dr. Camilla Elphick and Dr. Rashid Minhas, and a number of international NGOs and charities, we conducted one of the largest studies ever on witnesses of harassment and discrimination at work.

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Why witnesses? The first time that I was victimized and became the target of inappropriate workplace behavior, I hadn't even left university. A couple of academics who were far more senior than me repeatedly and relentlessly targeted me. And every time something happened, I wished that someone would speak up. That they would tell me that I'm not overreacting, that I'm sane, that there's something that we could do.

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But instead, I found myself with reporting paralysis. I didn't speak up and neither did most other people. Why didn't I just speak up? Well, I was worried about the consequences for my career, because I loved my work. I was also worried about things that many people see as barriers, like not being believed or taken seriously, like my situation resulting in no change. Luckily, over the past couple of years, we've seen that reporting paralysis is affecting fewer people and some people are able to now have voices who before were voiceless.

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When we first started Spot, we allowed people to submit statements about experiencing harassment or discrimination to talktospot.com. And as researchers, we looked at these stories, and we were shocked when we found that 93 percent of victims reported that there was at least one witness. These things aren't happening behind closed doors. Further research has since come out which has further repeated this idea that most harassment and discrimination is witnessed. And so how do we mobilize these witnesses?

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First, let's talk about the psychology of being a witness. In 2018, two women were at a Starbucks when they watched a barista deny access to a washroom to two African American men. Instead, the barista called the police. The two active bystanders took a video of the men in handcuffs and posted it online. This active bystander had an almost immediate positive effect. Starbucks closed a number of its doors and implemented bias training.

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Most of us think that we would be these active bystanders. That we would be these kinds of heroes. In fact, in research on this, when researchers give people hypothetical scenarios and ask if they would intervene, most of us say, "Yes, of course, of course I would stand up." But even when those same researchers present an actual physical situation where someone needs to actually intervene, most people do nothing. And they fall prey to the well-known bystander effect. Why? And what are the barriers that people are facing?

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In our research, three quarters of people who we had interviewed and who we had participate in our study -- which was over 1,000 participants -- three quarters of them said that they never reported the incident to HR, they never reported the incident to someone who could do something about it. And the barriers that they cited? The number one barrier was actually the exact same as the main barrier that victims report, which is the fear of consequences or retaliation. Even witnesses are worried about what might happen to them and their careers. Other reasons that people reported was not wanting to interfere or not wanting to be a snitch, not knowing they could report, or not knowing how. All of these things can be targeted with better education and better systems in workplaces.

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But the story of the witness isn't complete without also talking about the consequences for the witnesses themselves. If you were to see someone who just witnessed a crime being committed on the street, you would almost certainly go up to that witness and say, "Are you OK? Do you need some support?" You might even offer them counseling or therapy to process what they just saw. But witnesses at work are largely invisible. And of course, so is support for them. And some of this invisibility might even be internalized.

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When we asked our participants about reporting, and when we asked them about the negative consequences for them, we found that most people said, when asked directly, "Did witnessing this experience have a negative repercussion?" Most people said, "No, I'm fine." But when we looked at the qualitative entries, when we looked at what people actually wrote about this experience, we found that these experiences had profoundly negative impacts. They increased stress and anxiety and depression, they increased the prevalence of desire to leave the organization, loss of faith.

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Why is there this discrepancy? It seems that we're doing a comparative evaluation. "Compared to the victim, nothing really happened to me." But that's not really the right question. And support shouldn't be invisible just because you're less affected. Because we're all affected and we should all be supporting each other.

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We also found evidence of a social contagion. While 23 percent of participants told HR, more, 46 percent, told colleagues, usually someone on their team, and 67 percent told someone outside of work. What this shows is that the negative consequences of the situation, where someone is harassed or discriminated against, go far beyond the room. People take that story with them and that discontent grows as they tell more and more people, and this has the real effect that is almost certainly threatening your ability as an organization to retain and attract diverse and excellent candidates.

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So what do we do to stop this social contagion? What do we do to reduce these barriers and how do we provide support for witnesses and victims? How can we be better allies? And it's easier than you might think. In my research, I've come across five particular things that I think every organization can and should do to help tackle this issue and to build healthier workplaces.

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First, showcase your commitment. If your leadership isn't repeatedly saying how important diversity and inclusion is to them, and living by example, no one is going to believe you. An HR-driven campaign is insufficient. Your organization is a direct mirror of its leadership team, and they need to be setting the tone.

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Second, train your managers. The main person who's likely to harass someone in your organization is a manager. Now, why? Perhaps because power corrupts, or perhaps because we promote people into managerial roles because they're excellent at their jobs, and we assume that they will pick up the people skills, pick up the management skills along the way. But then they don't. And this provides a fertile ground for harassment and discrimination with unrealistic expectations, with poor time management, with poor conflict management skills. Train your managers.

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Third, we know from research on victims that without the ability to report anonymously, the fear of consequences is so overwhelming that most people will never report incidents. We found the same was true for witnesses. When we asked them directly, in our study, whether organizations could do something to improve the fact that they might report, they said, number one that they could do better was allowing for witness anonymity. Second was providing choices about who to report to. Perhaps shockingly, although managers are the most likely person to be perpetrating harassment or discrimination, in many organizations they're also supposed to be your first point of contact when things go wrong. Now that's a major sticking point. So being able to choose who you go to is crucial.

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Third, encouraging witness reporting. Back to setting a tone in your organization, saying you can and should report things, and you can help stand up for each other.

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Fourth, even when you have all of this in place, most people will not speak to HR. We know this, because at Spot, we thought anonymity would solve everything. It did not. Anonymity is one piece of the puzzle. Conducting surveys means that you go out to your employees, you don't wait for them to come to you. And you ask everybody about how they feel about the health of inclusion and diversity efforts within the organization. And be specific. Ask people about specific incidents or specific things they've witnessed. Because just like in our survey, if you ask people directly if they have experienced harassment or discrimination, the default answer is no. But if you ask about specific experiences or specific behaviors, most people go, "Oh, yeah, I saw that the other week." So making sure you ask the right questions is crucial.

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Finally, and most importantly, research shows that one of the best ways to mitigate the bystander effect is to build a shared social identity. It's not about policing each other, it's not about calling each other out, it's about being a cohesive unit. We are in this together. If you attack one of us, you are attacking all of us. Because wouldn't you want that? Wouldn't you want someone to stand by you if something negative happens? We're all, hopefully, collectively building an organization that is stronger and healthier and more diverse and inclusive.

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Without my allies, I wouldn't be here. When I was first targeted with inappropriate behavior at work, I fell into a depression, and I almost left academia altogether. Without a few people who stood by me, I wouldn't be on this stage right now. And I wish I had a happy ending for you. But unfortunately, these individuals are still at it. You see, in organizational structures where colleagues work in dispersed ways, where it's difficult to know who even to report to, never mind what the consequences might be, these kinds of behaviors are most likely to flourish for longer. But that doesn't stop me from trying to stop it.

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And I can tell you one thing -- that over the past couple of years of my research, I have found that there have been so many positive changes. Changes in legislation, changes in attitudes, and organizations are finally taking these issues seriously. I swear, the time of the harassers and the bullies and the discriminators is coming to an end.

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Thank you.

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(Applause)