In tech, sexism is in the water

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It's been a very bad summer for Silicon Valley bros.

James Damore, the Google engineer and author of the now-infamous memo on gender, "Google's Ideological Echo Chamber," was fired last week, just as Uber co-founder Garrett Camp announced that Travis Kalanick, among the bro-iest of tech bros, would not be returning as CEO of the company after he was revealed to have fostered a work culture of sexual harassment and discrimination.

Last week's news follows a series of New York Times reports chronicling widespread sexual harassment of women in tech. As a result of one story, Chris Sacca of Lowercase Capital, Dave McClure of 500 Startups and the startup advisor Marc Canter all issued mea culpas. In a clunky and tone-deaf statement, Canter acknowledged that his behavior was "endemic of the bro culture" that permeates the tech industry.

It will take more than a handful of PR crises and firings to change the culture in Silicon Valley, of course. But we can consider it progress that tech companies and their leaders are being forced to commit publicly to better practices, as Google CEO Sundar Pichai did last week when he said in a statement that Damore's memo is "contrary to the company's basic values and code of conduct." Let's hope that the summer of 2017 is the first of several stormy seasons.

When I worked at Google as an assistant five years ago, it was not easy for employees to discern what the company's basic values were. I never heard anyone refer to an official code of conduct. We talked a lot about

"Googliness," which the company described as "a mashup of passion and drive that's hard to define but easy to spot."

The unofficial code of conduct was communicated in other ways. Though the Silicon Valley bros who fell from grace this summer had objectified or demeaned women in flagrant ways, when I worked at Google, it wasn't sexual infractions that caused many women in my department to bristle. Rather, we were aggravated by structural inequities that our male managers probably didn't even notice.

Here's the wide-angle picture. Five men helmed the office as directors, while several very capable and intelligent women shared their responsibilities but not their titles. Generally, the more senior women succeeded in so-called female realms, such as PR, human resources and administration - departments that were positioned to assist the directors rather than collaborate with them - and were rarely allowed meaningful access to the corridors of male power.

Most of the directors had a wife who worked primarily inside the home. The senior women who orbited them had husbands who did not. The directors all had assistants and, in emergencies, access to a team of additional assistants. The senior women had no assistants and were responsible for organizing their own professional and personal lives.

Ageism and sexism went hand in hand. Younger women often rose faster and were given more interesting roles than older women, perhaps because the younger women were viewed as unsaddled with family responsibilities or unlikely to present a threat. Or maybe the directors, all of whom had daughters, respected the ambitions of younger women more than the experience of the older ones.

I worked at Google for only a year, and I was not shy in my exit survey: I left because I had watched women fight to endear themselves to men

who had haphazard and unresponsive management styles. Even the most successful of the senior women did not get what they wanted. They were allowed to gather crumbs, but they were not given a seat at the table.

I never met a James Damore, a Travis Kalanick, a Chris Sacca, a Dave McClure or a Marc Canter at Google. The men I knew - and still know - had no particular animus toward women. I doubt any of them knew how the women in our department, especially the more senior ones, struggled.

To address the cumulative sexism I witnessed, Google would have to invest time and resources into figuring out how the individuals in our 60-person group related to one another. For this to happen, women would need to be able to tell the truth without risking their jobs. Alphabet, Google's parent company, has more than 60,000 employees. Examining the structure of each department to this degree would be a tall order.

The worst bros are the easiest to make cases out of, and I'm glad some of them have had a very bad summer. Their downfalls will move the needle forward. But casual, everyday sexism is in the water in Silicon Valley.