

Does Workplace Sexual Harassment Training Really Work? Evolving Best Practices for EAPs

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[Originally published in the *Journal of Employee Assistance*, Vol 48, No.3: Pgs. 24-27, 3rd Qtr 2018.]

Increased awareness and prevention of sexual harassment and disrespectful behavior has become a priority in today's multi-gender, multi-generational workforce. Unfortunately, unacceptable levels of systemic sexual harassment and other abusive behavior have persisted for decades despite widespread adoption of policies and practices ostensibly designed to thwart them. High publicity court cases and social media campaigns like *#MeToo* and *#TimesUp* reveal warning signs of toxic workplace cultures (inadequate policies, lax enforcement and escalating patterns of behavior) were routine in multiple industry sectors, yet neither prevented nor addressed for decades.

Not limited to the US, the *#MeToo* phenomenon has gone global, with women sharing personal accounts of sexual harassment in 85 countries and counting (Fortune, 11-17-17). Despite existing laws prohibiting workplace sexual harassment in over 120 countries, examples around the world persist where individuals continue to experience abuse and other discriminatory behavior that ultimately undermine economic growth for all. As more continue to speak out about mistreatment, employers must realize that workplace harassment remains a lingering and pervasive problem. Conventional system-wide education, management training efforts, and existing reporting mechanisms have simply been inadequate to guarantee workplaces as zones of respect and opportunity.

How do we know that current training paradigms are not adequate to prevent workplace sexual harassment?

There is a notable lack of empirical research regarding what has evolved as standardized sexual harassment prevention training actually has the desired effect of changing abusive workplace behavior. Questions about the efficacy of sexual harassment training are not new (Pryor & McKinney, 1995; Bisom-Rapp, 2001). To date, few research studies have detected post-training reductions in sexual harassment, and none have identified training that was particularly effective. Cheung, et al (2017) noted "woefully little research has assessed the effectiveness of such programs on behavioral and attitudinal outcomes."

Perhaps more importantly, there is a lack of clarity about the purpose of workplace sexual harassment training. In 2016, the US EEOC reported that much of employer efforts since the 1980s to reduce workplace harassment have been unsuccessful in elevating employee compliance or greatly altering workplace culture - it's been too focused on simply avoiding legal liability (EEOC, 2016). One group of researchers reviewed copies of 74 sexual harassment training materials from 1980-2016, finding them heavily influenced by historical content developed following the 1986 US Supreme Court ruling that sexual harassment violated federal discrimination law, and such content was chiefly aimed at avoiding risk and litigation, rather than actually preventing such behavior (Tippett, 2017).

It's Time to Adopt Alternative Training Approaches

The prevailing orientation of workplace harassment prevention trainings which narrowly educate employees about policies, procedures and prohibited conduct has placed far too much emphasis on the simple existence of training and not nearly enough on the outcomes of these activities. Such efforts, like written (but unenforced) policies are merely evidence of symbolic compliance, and their potential for reducing harassment is unlikely (Buckner, Hindman & Huelsman, 2014). Additionally, researchers have identified unintended consequences (Bingham & Scherer, 2001) with some trainings triggering stereotypical ideas of men as powerful and women as vulnerable (Tinkler, 2013), while others found them least effective for those identifying with more traditional masculine roles, and who equated masculinity with power (Kearney, Rochlen, & King, 2004).

The 2016 EEOC Report proposes employers reconsider training approaches, replacing them with interactions which reflect and support the mission, visions, and values of the organization (EEOC, 2016). Essentially, this entails moving from cognitive, procedurally-based content to methods which increase dexterity in social awareness skills; empathy, adaptability, conflict management, and teamwork.

Examples of Alternative Training Approaches

Promoting workplace civility, equality and respect: Encouraging civility, equality and respect for others as key essential components to achieve optimum workplace productivity and organizational success recognizes the growing positive correlations between employee engagement, inclusive cultures and higher productivity, profits, customer satisfaction, employee retention, innovation, and reduced absenteeism (Kataria, Rastogi & Garg 2013). Fostering civility can be challenging, particularly in environments that pride themselves on aggressive, disruptive behavior in the marketplace. Research by Jaing, et al (2014) found that engaged workers in organizations with high-level anti-sexual harassment practices and who experience few sexual harassment incidents reciprocate with enhanced commitment and longer retention intentions.

Bystander Intervention: The typical workplace sexual harassment training assumes abusive behavior at work is willful, conscious activity and that people choose to disrespect others due to underlying negative prejudice or feelings of superiority. Unfortunately, this does not account for the largest group of workers – those who witness disrespectful behavior and/or workplace harassment, and yet do not act. Martin Seligman's Learned Helplessness research theorizes the way people perceive an event often determines its effect on their behavior. This may result in a reduced response initiation and a difficulty in believing that ones' responses will matter. Diffusion of responsibility occurs when the more individuals in a group, the less likely individuals are to act because they think the responsibility rests with others, as famously illustrated by the 1964 Kitty Genovese incident. If an individual sees a toxic workplace environment as pervasive and beyond their control, their inclination to act diminishes, learning to react passively in the face of improper behavior. Bystander empowerment seeks to encourage both men and women to interrupt unacceptable behavior, with a goal of changing workplace social norms.

Identifying Unconscious Bias: Efforts to reduce unconscious bias recognize that prejudices are buried so deeply that individuals are typically unaware of their existence, and surface without conscious knowledge through interpersonal interactions. Unconscious (or implicit) bias training teaches employees to be aware of ingrained biases, to practice strategies for blunting their effects, avoid micro-aggressions, and mitigate prejudicial actions. Using interactive training in behavioral effectiveness, individuals become better at exploring differing opinions and points of view. Another goal of increasing awareness about hidden biases is that if individuals in groups believe that everyone around them is trying hard to fight stereotypes and prejudices, they will do the same. This approach has already been adopted by an estimated one quarter of US employers, projected to double by 2020. As recently illustrated by Starbucks, efforts to raise awareness of unconscious bias and related behaviors is not just limited to colleagues, but includes customers, clients and users. Having previously only offered such training to management, Starbucks has embraced the approach for all its 175,000 workers. Notably, this initiative includes an evaluation component to measure effectiveness, a critical shortcoming of many employer training programs.

Increasing Emotional Intelligence: Numerous research studies support emotional intelligence as a stronger predictor of workplace performance than cognitive intelligence (Bennett, 2011). Emotional intelligence is about learning to harness the power of emotions, then directing them in a beneficial way. This approach seeks to increase the ability to recognize ones' own emotional state and that of others, and through conscious choices in social interaction to be more capable in building and sustaining relationships. Being truly conscious of feelings and better reading of emotional cues limits inadvertent transgressions, thoughtlessness, and conflicts from inattention and ignorance. Target competencies of such interventions include increasing empathy, intrapersonal and interpersonal skills, adaptability, and feeling and expressing positive feelings. Training outcomes include enhanced skills supporting collaboration, open communication and transparency (Mayer, Barsade & Roberts, 2008), and are transferable to addressing personal reactions to sexual harassment as well as bystander interventions.

(More) Effective Communication Skills: Learning exercises which emphasize improved communication and relational competences like listening, acknowledgement, transparency and constructive feedback allow managers and co-workers to better appreciate each other as individuals, not as ethnic, race or gender groups. These aids to understanding create working environments which align with organizational success (Buckner, Hindman & Huelsman 2014). One example of an alternative communication model *Is it OK..?*, represents an approach whereby co-workers don't assume they know how their actions will be received and ask rather than presume. This encourages individuals to become more aware about the potential impacts of

their conduct and shows respect for the opinions and reactions of others. It allows everyone to participate in the task of determining what is acceptable in the workplace, creating a more thoughtful environment where all are heard and acknowledged.

Do Training Methods Really Matter?

Content suggestions for increasing the value of sexual harassment training include moving beyond familiar, established scenarios to more nuanced examinations of ambiguous areas between professional and social relationships, the impact of unequal power, and definitions of consent in work hierarchies. These areas of behavior may not be illegal, but can lead to uncomfortable, toxic working dynamics.

In judging the usefulness of face-to-face group interactive discussions vs. largely individually-completed online training modalities, empirical analysis is still relatively unresolved. Customizing training for different workforces and workplace environments to meet individual learning styles and group preferences, however can increase participation and improve learning outcomes. For example, factory or service workers are unlikely to draw parallels between their work environment and white-collar offices portrayed in training videos, likewise Millennials may not identify with outdated, irrelevant images. Germane, interactive training involving methods like role-playing may increase effectiveness because employees can ask questions and model appropriate behavior.

Impacting the Organization

Organizational culture is a collectively embedded set of beliefs, expectations and assumptions guiding behavior among its members. Employees' understanding of workplace culture influences their interpretations of workplace policies and practices. Changing such environments is not an overnight event, but rather a complex process that evolves over time. Creating and sustaining desired elements of workplace culture requires a clear vision, continuous adaptive improvement processes, and effective methods for communication.

There is no magic bullet for the problem of workplace incivility and sexual harassment. Training alone is insufficient to drive the necessary cultural shift. To be truly effective, the use of relevant, effectual training approaches and methods can only be considered one component in an organization's obligation to provide a safe, respectful environment. Without reinforcement through genuine leadership commitment, thoughtful policies, and human resource practices that incorporate effective training, work organizations risk nullifying their efforts to generate positive impacts.

Value Added Roles for EAPs

Unfortunately, EAPs are faced with the uncomfortable reality that most contemporary workplace harassment prevention training fails to deliver its desired outcome – a reduction in disrespectful and prohibited behavior. In addition to providing counseling and coaching to employees, as workplace mental health and productivity experts, EAPs have an additional opportunity to deliver competent policy consultation, assistance to leadership and effective training to encourage employees to speak up about workplace misconduct and eliminate uncivil behavior.

Examples of value-added organizational consultation and development services include:

- Educating employers of incidence of SH and organizational risks
- Assistance in designing and administering workforce surveys
- Assistance to develop/revise policies and processes
- Creating training materials and delivering training programs
- Measuring and evaluating outcomes of efforts
- Recommendations for subsequent efforts and activities

Calls for heightened prevention of workplace harassment have spurred many work organizations to revisit policies and embrace expanded workplace efforts. More substantive sexual harassment training has potential to impact individual attitudes and workplace culture, but alone, it will not solve the problem. To meet this challenge, new approaches require well-articulated presentations of organizational values and operational boundaries for appropriate employee and management interactions to change workplace norms, and standards of oversight.

Linking training with easier workplace reporting and responsive procedures by using scenarios which illustrate the complete spectrum of responding to disrespectful workplace behavior--from informal discussions with peers to informal and formal procedures to know where to go, how the process will unfold, how they will be supported, and how complaints will be investigated holds great potential. Most current training and related procedures don't do that, which may help explain the EEOC's finding that 70 percent of harassment (sexual or otherwise) goes unreported. The goal is to foster a speak-up culture at work where employees feel heard and valued, resulting in increased financial and intrinsic employer benefits: including higher employee engagement, recruiting and retention, and enhanced culture and reputation.

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