

## **Does Sexual Harassment Training Work?**

### **2018 EASNA Annual Institute – Bernie McCann, PhD, CEAP**

Using contemporary training approaches for prevention of workplace sexual harassment as a lens, this presentation considers new ideas and alternate methods with promise to increase awareness of respectful workplace standards and have meaningful impact on both individual conduct and collective comportment across work groups.

#### **Historical & Contemporary Context of Workplace Sexual Harassment**

Both work organizations and workers have identified increased awareness and prevention of sexual harassment and disrespectful behavior as a priority in today's multi-gender, multi-generational workforce. However, unacceptable levels of systemic workplace sexual harassment and other abusive behavior have persisted for decades despite widespread adoption of employer 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, multiple reports & escalating patterns of behavior, etc.) are frequently evident -- yet often were neither prevented nor addressed. As more victims speak out with allegations of mistreatment, employers must realize that workplace harassment remains a lingering and pervasive problem. It appears conventional system-wide employee education, management training efforts, and existing reporting mechanisms have been inadequate to transform workplaces into zones of respectful treatment and opportunity for all.

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

*Lack of empirical research that such training has the desired effect of changing behavior* - Questions about the effectiveness of sexual harassment training are not new (Pryor & McKinney, 1995; Bisom-Rapp, 2001). To date, few research studies have examined post-training reductions in sexual harassment, and none have found that such training was particularly effective. It may be that the paucity of efforts to gauge training effectiveness is a direct result of a lack of organizational incentives to conduct internal studies of their sexual harassment prevention efforts.

*Confusion about the role/purpose of sexual harassment training* - In 2016, the US EEOC reported that much of the effort and training since the 1980s to proactively reduce workplace harassment has been ineffective in either fostering elevated employee tolerance nor greatly altering workplace culture -- it's been too focused on simply avoiding legal liability (EEOC, 2016). Researchers at the University of Oregon reviewed copies of 74 sexual harassment training materials from 1980–2016. They found the materials heavily influenced by early content developed in the 1980s and early 1990s, and chiefly aimed at avoidance of litigation (Tippett, 2017).

#### **New Approaches in Training to Prevent Workplace Harassment**

Too often, workplace harassment prevention training programs simply aim to educate employees about sexual harassment policies and procedures, and conduct which is specifically prohibited. This prevailing orientation of risk reduction for employer liability has placed far too much emphasis on the existence of measures like training and not nearly enough on the effectiveness of these measures. Such training programs, like written (but unenforced) policies and procedures, are merely symbolic evidence of legal compliance, and their potential for reducing harassment is unlikely (Buckner, Hindman & Huelsman, 2014). Additionally, some research has identified a link between the prevailing, fear-based modes of training and unintended responses that may lead employees to avoid interacting those outside their own gender, demographic group or organizational level.

The 2016 EEOC Task Force Report proposes employers institute training with clear goals in mind, suggesting it is time to reconsider older training approaches designed to minimize exposure to liability, replacing them with respect-based interventions. Cheung, et al (2017) note "woefully little research has assessed the effectiveness of such programs on behavioral and attitudinal outcomes." Essentially, this means moving from cognitive, procedurally-based content and methods to increasing competence in soft skills and social awareness dexterity, such as empathy, adaptability, conflict management, teamwork, and resilience.

#### **Examples of Alternate Training Approaches**

***Promoting workplace civility, equality and respect*** for others as key organizational values and essential components to productivity and organizational success. This reasoning recognizes the growing body of research supporting positive correlations between employee engagement and organizational performance measures, such as profit margin. Higher levels of engagement are strongly related to higher levels of innovation. It also aligns with accepted management principles that treating all workers with equal amounts of respect and non-discrimination is critical to building inclusive cultures that engage every member of the workforce fully. Fostering civility can be challenging, particularly in workplace environments that pride themselves on aggressive, risk-taking, disruptive behavior in the marketplace. Encouraging these values in interpersonal exchanges, job assignments, and opportunities with a focus on encouraging and supporting behavior across employees, work teams, and departments will increase employee engagement, boost performance and retention rates. 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 to and longer retention intentions.

***Bystander Sensitivity Training*** - The typical workplace sexual harassment training approach assumes that harassment behavior in work organizations is willful, conscious behavior; that bad people make choices to disrespect, harass or abuse others due to underlying negative feelings toward certain individuals or feelings of superiority about their own group. This good person/bad person

paradigm does not account for the largest group of workers (bystanders) who witness disrespectful behavior and/or workplace harassment, yet do not act – for whatever reason. Drawing on Martin Seligman’s Learned Helplessness research – the way people perceive an event determines its effect on their behavior. Specifically this is characterized by reduced response initiation and a difficulty in believing that ones’ responses will succeed. Agency is the ability to act when a person sees action as necessary and responsible. 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, this was famously illustrated by the Kitty Genovese incident. If an individual sees a toxic workplace environment as permanent, pervasive and beyond their control, their inclination to act diminishes. Employees who witness harassment or abuse may see no way of changing the situation. If an organization’s culture makes it apparent that such concerns will not be addressed, employees learn to react passively, to feel helpless in the face of unacceptable behavior. Fear of victimization also occurs in such environments wherein due to fear they will be attacked, ridiculed or lose status, witnesses avoid risking action.

**Identifying Unconscious Bias** – What these training efforts recognize is that we all have prejudices buried so deeply that individuals are typically unaware of their existence, and surface without our conscious knowledge though positive and negative micro messages in our interactions with others. Unconscious (or implicit) bias training teaches employees to be aware of their ingrained biases, learn strategies for blunting their effects, avoid micro-aggressions, and to mitigate potential prejudicial actions. This approach includes training in interactive behavioral effectiveness, so individuals become better at exploring differing opinions, ideas and points of view and building on others’ suggestions to generate innovative and successful solutions to complex business problems. The goal of increasing awareness about hidden biases is that if individuals believe that everyone around them is trying hard to fight stereotypes and prejudices, they will do the same. Unconscious Bias training has already been adopted by an estimated one quarter of US employers, including Microsoft, NBC, Google, Deloitte, and the Royal Bank of Canada -- a number projected to grow to 50% by 2020. As most recently illustrated by Starbucks, training to raise awareness of unconscious bias and behaviors is not limited to colleagues, but includes customers, clients and users. Starbucks has embraced the approach for all its workers, having previously only offered it to management. Notably, the Starbucks initiative includes an evaluation component to measure effectiveness, a critical shortcoming of many employer training programs.

Training in **Effective Communication Skills**. Creation of skilled communication patterns and habits using techniques like rapport, inquiry mode, transparency and feedback allow employees to get to know each other as individuals, not as ethnic, race or gender groups. These aids to understanding create working environments of connections, trust and opportunities for collaboration. One example of an alternative communication mode, *#IsItOk?* represents a mindset in which co-workers don’t assume they know how their actions will be received, they ask rather than presume. This encourages individuals to become more aware about the potential impacts of their conduct, it also 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 everyone can be heard and acknowledged.

**Increasing Emotional Intelligence** is about recognizing your own emotional state and the emotional states of others and through conscious choices in how you interact and engage with others to become more capable in building and sustaining relationships. Emotional intelligence skills support collaboration, more open communication, transparency, and people working for the purpose of the organization succeeding (Mayer, Barsade & Roberts, 2008). Training outcomes include improving the value of interpersonal relations with linkage to organizational priorities such as improved collaboration and increased effectiveness. One tactic is to identify case studies and materials to help managers, mentors and facilitators build a coaching culture rather than an evaluation culture.

#### **Do Training Methods Matter?**

Suggestions for increasing the value of such training include moving beyond the familiar, predictable scenarios to more nuanced examinations of context, the ambiguous lines and grey areas between professional and social relationships, the impact of unequal power, and definitions of consent within work hierarchies. These gray areas of behavior may not be illegal but may run up against workplace policies and/or lead to uncomfortable, if not toxic working dynamics. Regarding the efficacy of face-to-face group interactive discussions vs. largely individually-completed online training modalities, empirical testing is still relatively unresolved; however, customizing or adapting training to different workforces and workplace environments for individual learning styles and group preferences can increase participation rates and improve attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. Individual learning styles and preferences can increase participation rates and improve attitudes and behavioral outcomes. For example, factory or service workers aren’t likely to draw many parallels between their work environment and a corporate office portrayed in a training video, likewise Millennials may not identify with not relevant images. Relevant, interactive training involving tactics like role-playing increases effectiveness because employees can ask questions and learn to model appropriate behavior.

#### **Impacting the Organization**

Organizational culture is a collectively embedded set of beliefs, expectations and assumptions that influence and guide thinking and behavior among its members. Employees' understanding of organizational values and beliefs influence their interpretations of organizational policies, practices, and procedures. Changing organizational culture is not an overnight event, but rather a complex process that evolves slowly over time. The first lever for changing a recurring cultural behavior is to make people aware of it. Creating and sustaining desired elements of organizational culture requires a clear vision; adaptive and continuous improvement processes; and effective methods for communicating to members.

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 with equal opportunity for all. Without being reinforced by genuine leadership commitment and a comprehensive view of thoughtful policies and human resource practices that incorporate effective training, work organizations risk nullifying their efforts to positively impact workplace culture.

### **Roles for EAPs & Workplace Professionals**

EAP providers, corporate trainers and HR staff are faced with the shameful reality that most contemporary harassment training fails to deliver desired outcomes. As workplace mental health and productivity experts, EAPs and other workplace professionals have a valuable role in providing competent policy consultation, assistance to leadership and effective employee training to encourage employees to speak up about workplace misconduct and eliminate the spectrum of uncivil and abusive workplace behavior. Examples of EAP/Workplace Professional consultation and additional services include:

- A. Educating employers of actual incidence of SH and organizational risks; e.g., smaller firms have higher rates of higher prevalence of SH; academic environments regarding Title IX regulations
- B. Assistance in designing and administering workforce surveys
- C. Assistance in convening task forces or study groups to develop or revise policies and processes
- D. Creating training materials and delivering training programs
- E. Identifying additional external resources
- F. Measuring and evaluating outcomes of efforts
- G. Recommendations for subsequent efforts and activities

### **Conclusions/Parting Thoughts**

Calls for heightened efforts in the prevention of workplace harassment have resulted in the passage and implementation of new laws at the government level, have spurred organizational policy reviews by work organizations, and additional measures are likely. To meet this challenge, new approaches that use well-articulated presentations of organizations values and operational boundaries for appropriate employee and management interactions to change workplace norms, organizational culture, and standards of worksite interactions are needed. Linking training with workplace reporting and procedures is one aspect. It's crucial that employees understand how to address concerns and experiences of harassment. Scenarios which illustrate the complete spectrum of responding to disrespectful workplace behavior: from informal discussions with peers to informal and formal reporting procedures: to know where to go, how the process will unfold, how they will be supported, and how complaints will be investigated allow organizations to hold individuals accountable for their behaviors. Most harassment training doesn't do that, which may help explain the EEOC's finding that 70% of instances of harassment – sexual or otherwise – go unreported. The goal is to foster a speak-up culture where employees feel heard and validated, which will result in both financial and intrinsic benefits: including higher employee engagement and retention, ease of recruiting, enhanced corporate oversight, and a stronger culture and reputation.

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