COMMENTARY

Sexual harassment training: Often necessary but rarely sufficient

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As awareness of sexual harassment has increased, so too has training to address sexual harassment and sexual assault in organizations. When this training is thoughtfully developed and based on training theory and research, it is more likely to be effective (Medeiros & Griffith, 2019). However, training on its own is unlikely to fully resolve a systemic problem like sexual harassment. Even the best developed and most evidence-based training will have limited impact if the training is embedded in an institutional context that does not support the training, or worse, tolerates incivility and other exclusionary behaviors. After an extensive review of 30 years of corporate training conducted by the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission’s Select Task Force on the Study of Harassment in the Workplace, the co-chair of the task force concluded that: “If you are thinking that training alone is a panacea to helping out any type of harassment, [it’s not]. It doesn’t work” (Folz, 2016, p. 1).

A training-based perspective is limited in three respects. First, a training-based perspective identifies the training “solution” before the harassment and assault “problem” has been fully diagnosed and emphasizes a single intervention to the exclusion of other interventions that may be equally or more effective. In some cases, policies and procedures have more powerful influences than training (Williams, Fitzgerald, & Drasgow, 1999). Second, a training-based perspective positions harassment as an individual-level problem rather than an organizational-level problem, suggesting that the key to addressing sexual harassment is “fixing” people. But people are difficult to “fix” (Perry, Kulik, & Schmidtke, 1998), and a “fixing people” approach requires organizations to offer training continuously, being particularly vigilant to “fixing” newcomers to ensure that the impact of training is not diluted over time. Third, a training-based perspective typically focuses attention on a very small set of contextual variables (e.g., resources allocated to harassment training; climate that tolerates sexual harassment) that relate explicitly to sexual harassment and sexual harassment training. This narrow focus misses the broader contextual variables (HR practices, leadership, or reward systems) that foster climates that contribute to a range of problematic behaviors in organizations.

An organizational development and change (ODC) perspective on sexual harassment and assault may be a useful alternative. An ODC perspective starts with an organizational diagnosis, then engages in a system-wide process to address the diagnosed issues, and identifies interventions (including, but not limited to, training) that simultaneously target individuals in the organization as well the organization itself.

An organization development and change perspective

Organization development is a planned process of creating fundamental culture change in organizations struggling with seemingly intractable problems such as sexual harassment and assault.
adopts a total systems approach to surface the implicit, often unconscious, patterns of behavior on the part of all organizational members that may help or hinder progress toward desired change (Burke & Noumair, 2015). Importantly, an ODC perspective views problems like sexual harassment as systemic phenomena that reflect deeper issues embedded at multiple levels within the organization (Golom, 2018). Seemingly isolated individual instances of inappropriate or egregious workplace behavior are often reinforced by the organization’s reward systems, leadership and management practices, and organizational structures. Viewing sexual harassment as a systemic problem results in the understanding that effective interventions are ones that embed accountability and responsibility for change throughout the organizational system, addressing contextual factors that are larger than the problem immediately presenting itself. An ODC approach to sexual harassment is distinguished from a training-based approach in two ways. First, an ODC approach emphasizes joint diagnosis before solution identification. Second, an ODC approach has as its focus changing the organization and its culture rather than changing its people.

**Joint diagnosis**

An ODC approach begins with a diagnosis—specifically a joint or mutual diagnosis process that engages multiple stakeholders to make sense of the challenges the organization is facing (Burke & Noumair, 2015). The people engaged in the diagnosis are not limited to experts with “the” answer (e.g., HR managers or external consultants who are tasked to deliver training). Rather, organizational members participate as architects to identify and design the change that is needed. Their involvement generates commitment to the change effort that makes real change more likely. Further, joint diagnosis brings a larger and wider range of information to the problem. It can involve interviews, focus groups, climate surveys, and on-site observations, engaging a wide range of stakeholders across organizational levels. This is critical because a clear view of the problem is only achieved by integrating information from stakeholders across all organizational levels. The use of a structured, diagnostic process that includes all members of the organization is likely to strengthen and deepen the organization’s understanding of its challenges and approaches to solving them, particularly around issues where employees are otherwise hesitant to come forward. Importantly, this joint diagnostic process is deliberately broader and more comprehensive than the needs analysis that is often highlighted in the training literature because a needs analysis is always an input to later training, whereas a joint diagnostic process is not.

**Culture change**

An ODC perspective focuses on fixing the system within which behavior occurs. Although climate and culture are related, an ODC perspective targets culture (the deeply embedded assumptions of organizations that are reflected in their values and beliefs) that may contribute to climates (shared perceptions and attitudes that individuals have). Most often, culture change requires changing the organization’s structure and practices to encourage, support, and reward desirable behaviors (Golom, 2015). With respect to sexual harassment, culture change could be achieved by adopting inclusive HR practices (e.g., recruitment, hiring, promotion, evaluation) that minimize status differentials across employees, increasing inclusive decision making and communication, and developing psychologically safe spaces for employees to share concerns around sexual harassment and other inappropriate behavior (Nishii & Rich, 2014). Culture change might also be achieved by coaching for inclusion—developing leaders who are open, available, and accessible to their employees, as inclusive leadership behaviors are likely to positively influence perceptions of inclusion and negatively influence experiences of mistreatment (Shore, Cleveland, & Sanchez, 2018). This broad portfolio of interventions also expands the metrics by which an organization might measure success. In particular, viewed from an ODC perspective, the culture assessments and climate perceptions that
Medeiros and Griffith (2019) position as moderators (contextual variables that influence training transfer) become indicators of a successful change effort in their own right. HR professionals need to recognize that successfully addressing sexual harassment and assault in their organizations is likely to involve more than a well-designed, best-practice training program. Engaging the entire system in diagnosing the problem, gathering information from a wide range of stakeholders, intervening at multiple levels of analysis, and transforming the organization’s underlying culture are more likely to produce lasting change. To truly eradicate sexual harassment and assault in an organization, HR professionals will need to embrace a bigger action agenda grounded in an ODC approach:

1. Systematically collect data from a variety of organizational stakeholders to reveal contextual factors that may be contributing to instances of workplace sexual harassment and other forms of incivility and discrimination.
2. Engage members of the organization in a dialogue to better understand that data and arrive at a shared diagnosis of contributors to the organization’s harassment problems (e.g., policies that inadvertently reward bad behavior).
3. Develop interventions that target individual (e.g., leadership style), group (e.g., norms), and organizational factors (e.g., reward structures) that contribute to the problem and that might produce a change in the organization’s culture and climate.
4. Build evaluation systems and adopt quality improvement metrics to track the progress of changes at the individual level (e.g., changes in knowledge and attitudes related to sexual harassment) as well as the organizational level (e.g., transparency with which sexual harassment grievances are managed, extent to which penalties are enforced).

Conclusion

We agree with Medeiros and Griffith (2019) that industrial and organizational (I-O) psychologists are well suited to support organizations in addressing challenges related to sexual harassment and assault. We also agree that if training is to be conducted, it should be based on best-practices as outlined by the authors. However, it is impossible to know if training is the right solution if a systems diagnosis has not been conducted prior and in partnership with organizational stakeholders. We conclude that I-O psychologists who engage organizations from an ODC perspective may be best able to help them enact the lasting changes required to combat sexual harassment and sexual assault.

References


