Workplace civility training: An antidote to traditional sexual harassment training

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Medeiros and Griffith (2019) note that there are many issues with sexual harassment training that are unique and, therefore, represent challenges when designing and delivering that type of training. In this commentary, we argue that workplace civility training is well-suited to overcome many of those challenges noted by Medeiros and Griffith and represents an effective approach to not only preventing sexual harassment, but also to changing the culture of harassment within an organization and, more specifically, a workgroup.

Although there are several models of civility training (e.g., Civility, Respect, Engagement in the Workforce (CREW); Osatuke, Moore, Ward, Dyrenforth, & Belton, 2009), in general, Workplace Civility Training (WCT) focuses on enhancing respect among all members of a workgroup. Such training begins by having a particular workgroup define what it means to treat each member within that workgroup with respect and dignity. Importantly, different workgroups may derive different definitions of what it means to treat everyone in their work unit with respect. Because of that, workplace civility is defined at the local level, or within the work unit. In other words, civility is not defined by leaders of an organization, although some components of civility may be shared among all workgroups. Instead, each workgroup decides, for themselves, what it means to treat each other with respect. Additionally, each workgroup decides, for themselves, the boundaries that exist for those respectful behaviors and how to hold each other accountable when those boundaries are crossed. Clearly, such behaviors and boundaries could include what constitutes appropriate behavior and language involving sexual innuendo and connotations in the workplace.

WCT should also be led by a trained external facilitator who is not only well-versed in facilitating discussion but also knowledgeable about discrimination and other employment laws. A trained facilitator can help ensure that agreed-upon behaviors are not violating anti-discrimination laws (e.g., it is not okay to only hire applicants under 40, regardless of whether the workgroup wants to do so), as well as ensure that such discussion is confidential and will not be used against anyone in the workgroup by upper management. Moreover, as noted by Medeiros and Griffith (2019), training is much more effective when led by external trainers as opposed to peers (Anderson & Whiston, 2005).

By agreeing on what constitutes respectful behavior as well as how they will hold each other accountable, employees are empowered to police themselves when a workplace behavior crosses, or even approaches, an agreed-upon boundary. Because all members of a workgroup are involved in determining those definitions and boundaries, members of the workgroup may also intervene when they witness inappropriate behaviors targeted toward others in their workgroup. In this way, the outcomes of a WCT can address early perceptions of sexual harassment and therefore generate a discussion about the questionable behavior before it escalates into something far more serious.

Incorporating WCT into the workplace also has many advantages over traditional sexual harassment training. Medeiros and Griffith (2019) noted that most employment training should create opportunities to practice and apply the learned skills in the work environment.
Clearly, sexual harassment training should not involve the opportunity to practice sexual harassment behavior in the workplace. A massive benefit of WCT is that such training focuses on what to do in the work environment, not what to avoid. By determining behaviors that are appropriate for achieving a respectful work environment, civil behaviors can easily be practiced and applied in the work environment on a daily basis.

Another issue noted by Medeiros and Griffith (2019) is that it is often difficult to measure the effectiveness of sexual harassment training due to socially desirable responses and/or the sensitive nature of the construct being measured. However, administering a WCT pre- and post-training assessment could provide evidence of any changes in attitudes or, more importantly, appropriate behaviors in the workplace, and thus serve as an effective evaluation of the veracity of the training intervention. Thankfully, there are a few workplace civility assessments that have been validated and can be used to assess such changes (e.g., Nagy, 2017).

In their focal article, Medeiros and Griffith (2019) mentioned that a needs analysis may result in identifying a particular department within an organization with pervasive harassment issues. They note that such a situation may require additional solutions for such a group, and/or for the group to be monitored more closely than others. With its focus on the workgroup, WCT is literally designed for such a situation. In fact, a consultant could use a WCT assessment to identify workgroups of low civility and then target those specific workgroups with an intensive civility training that not only helps the workgroup members to identify and recognize appropriate and inappropriate workplace behaviors but to also provide additional, skill-based training in areas such as person perception biases, conflict resolution, communication skills, and emotional intelligence. By including training that is both local and interactive, WCT contains a customized element of specificity for all workgroups.

A question Medeiros and Griffith (2019) discussed is whether sexual harassment training should involve a subgroup of the organization (such as those who may be more likely to harass others) or should such training involve everyone. Our strong contention is that in order to prevent sexual harassment, the culture of the organization must be changed, and in order for that culture to be changed, all employees must be involved in the training. Such a notion is entirely consistent with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission’s (EEOC’s) 2016 task force report on preventing harassment in the workplace (U.S. EEOC, 2016). Although WCT involves training at the workgroup level, and thus may be used to target a specific group or department, WCT should involve training for all employees within their particular workgroup within an organization. In doing so, the organization can change its culture to a respectful climate across all departments and workgroups.

Finally, Medeiros and Griffith (2019) noted that sexual harassment training may change attitudes in the short term, but much of the training literature suggests that long-term change in desired behaviors is not likely (Anderson & Whison, 2005). Perhaps one reason why such training is not effective is because it usually occurs one time over a relatively short time frame. For instance, the training in the Black, Weisz, Coats, and Patterson (2000) study cited by Medeiros and Griffith (2019) took place over 1 hour, whereas the Heppner, Humphrey, Hillenbrand-Gunn, and DeBord (1995) training occurred over 90 minutes. Even a later training studied by Heppner, Neville, Smith, Kivlghan, and Gershuny (1999) only consisted of three 90-minute trainings over 3 weeks. Given such little time on sexual harassment and assault training, is it any wonder that such training only seems to change viewpoints in the short term? We agree with the EEOC’s recommendation (U.S. EEOC, 2016) that in order to prevent sexual harassment, a change in culture must take place, and such a culture change is not going to happen in 90 minutes. Instead, such change must take place over months (not weeks) and involve hours (and not minutes) of training. An intensive WCT approach typically occurs over 3–6 months and involves a number of meetings that include reflection from previous discussions. This more intensive training is much more likely to enact a cultural change within an organization. Indeed, using the CREW approach (a model of workplace civility training), Leiter, Laschinger, Day, and Oore (2011) found that such training resulted in positive work environment changes 6 months after the civility training. Consequently, it is our
strong contention that in order for sexual harassment training to be effective, it must be take place over a much longer than usual (i.e., 90 minutes) time frame.

In conclusion, for sexual harassment training to be effective and long lasting, it must occur over an extended period of time, and it must focus on universal aspects of behavior (such as respect for others) rather than a 1 hour or so intervention on awareness and prevention. At the core of harassment is disrespect, and it is that disrespectful mentality that must be changed. Focusing on civility and respect in the workplace will change that disrespectful mentality over time. Having the civility training spread out over several weeks will allow trainees to practice civil behaviors and reflect on the reactions they observed with others in their workgroup. Over time, trainees can also learn how to intervene when they witness uncivil, or harassing, behavior, which can further prevent harassing behaviors. Such training will take time, but the investment will eventually change the culture of the organization into a more respectful work environment for all involved.

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