Beyond “checking the box”: Using accountability to promote the effectiveness of sexual misconduct training

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On October 9, 2012, Jerry Sandusky, the former Penn State assistant football coach, was convicted in a high-profile child sex abuse case that shocked the nation. Although Penn State had training programs focused on the recognition and reporting of sexual abuse in place, Sandusky abused eight young boys over a period of years, and officials at Penn State failed to notify the university or law enforcement (Perez-Pena, 2012). After this case, and recently with the #MeToo movement, similar cases have come to light where people were aware of ongoing sexual abuse but did nothing about it. Many of these cases notably occurred in organizations that likely had some form of sexual harassment training in place (e.g., Matt Lauer at NBC) but where such misconduct allegedly reoccurred unchecked. Such cases illustrate a clear challenge associated with sexual harassment and assault training (referred to broadly as sexual misconduct training here to avoid redundancies) that goes beyond the training itself—namely, a lack of accountability. Medeiros and Griffith (2019) explored how industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology can address the unique challenges related to sexual misconduct training, largely focusing on how the pre- and post-training environment can be managed to promote the transfer of training. We expand on their argument by highlighting accountability as a critical factor for generating transfer in these contexts.

Accountability is defined as being responsible for performing in line with prescribed standards in relation to the fulfillment of certain obligations and expectations (Schlenker, 1997). In recent years, scholars have worked to integrate the concept of accountability with literature on the transfer of training, noting that employees are more likely to perform prescribed behaviors, such as transferring learning to the workplace, when they are explicitly held accountable for doing so (Grossman & Burke-Smalley, 2018). The goal of behavioral change outside a training session can be realized by better understanding influences in the post-training environment, including the extent to which accountability mechanisms are clearly in place. Although some of these mechanisms overlap with factors discussed by Medeiros and Griffith (2019), we believe the concept of accountability warrants specific attention in the design of sexual misconduct training. Sexual harassment and assault are extremely sensitive issues that can render training uncomfortable, confusing, and even distressing. Employees may believe that applying such training falls outside of their work responsibilities or feel that it is not their job to get involved.

Thus, we highlight accountability as a critical factor for improving organizational practices pertaining to sexual misconduct. As exemplified in the Sandusky and similar cases, simply “checking the box” by mandating annual training attendance for employees is not enough. Steps need to be taken to ensure that every employee feels personally accountable for transferring such training when relevant situations arise. In the remainder of this commentary, we apply a theoretical model put forth by Grossman and Burke-Smalley (2018) to discuss the importance of accountability for sexual misconduct training and provide examples of how accountability can be promoted in this context specifically. Although we recognize that sexual misconduct training can and should target

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a variety of matters (such as understanding what behaviors are inappropriate, recognizing inappropriate behavior, reporting once a behavior is observed, etc.), for the sake of brevity, we provide examples focused on reporting sexual misconduct.

**Accountability and training transfer**

Grossman and Burke-Smalley (2018) established their accountability model by integrating the established “triangle model of responsibility” (Schlenker, Britt, Pennington, Murphy, & Doherty, 1994), with contextual moderators, specifically supervision type and skill type (Yelon & Ford, 1999). The responsibility triangle proposes links between three elements that create a sense of accountability for workers, namely, prescriptions, identity, and events. *Prescriptions* entail the formal or informal rules and expectations that guide an individual’s behavior implicitly or explicitly. *Events* are prescription-related, specific courses of action, that have manifested or are expected to manifest. *Identity* refers to an individual’s characteristics, such as roles, aspirations, commitments, and values related to the prescription and event.

Burke and Saks (2009) first explored how each link of the “responsibility triangle” can be applied to the transfer of training. Specifically, the *prescription–event* link is established when expectations regarding the implementation of trained skills are clear. The *prescription–identity* link pertains to relevance of the transfer perceived by trainees based on their roles in the organization or personal sense of obligation. Finally, the *identity–event* link is enabled based on the degree of connection to the training event and personal control over transfer-relevant actions.

Grossman and Burke-Smalley’s (2018) model further establishes that accountability strategies should be formulated in light of specific contextual features, namely the type of skills to be transferred (i.e., open or closed skill) and the degree of supervision characterizing the context in which skills will be transferred (i.e., high or low supervision). Here, we discuss context-specific approaches to bolstering each link in the accountability triangle while considering situational features throughout and providing a helpful summary with additional examples for practitioners in Table 1. Because handling sexual misconduct is often not perceived as a core job task, and it necessitates an adaptive response, it is typically performed under low supervision and is an open skill.

**Prescription–event link**

Individuals can vary widely in how they define and perceive sexual misconduct, making it particularly important for organizations to clearly communicate their expectations surrounding this type of training. Personal characteristics, such as sex and race, for instance, along with legal or institutional definitions of sexual misconduct can all influence interpretations of when transfer is called for (Tinkler, 2008). To feel accountable, however, a trainee needs to know exactly what he/she should be transferring from sexual misconduct training and how to do so, hence facilitating the prescription–event link. The goal should thus be to communicate expectations about specific behaviors that are valued or discouraged in the workplace and clearly align training content with expected outcomes. Given the range of sexual misconduct perceptions, this should include a clear definition of sexual misconduct, along with examples of relevant and irrelevant behaviors; otherwise employees may struggle to accurately judge the various factors involved (Roehling & Huang, 2015).

As another aspect of conveying transfer expectations, employees should be informed frequently that everyone is responsible for reporting any misconduct; it is not only the responsibility of individuals in higher positions. For this to happen, clear instructions for how to report an incident of sexual misconduct by utilizing an established system for handling such reporting should be available so that employees can apply the training. Thus, communicating expectations is necessary in this context but insufficient, as employees must have an accessible system or process for
<table>
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| Prescription–event link | • Individuals vary in their perceptions of what constitutes sexual misconduct.  
• Applying sexual misconduct training is not an everyday function or core job responsibility.  
• Sexual misconduct training often needs to be transferred to unique or ambiguous workplace situations.  
• Sexual misconduct is a sensitive topic. | • Communicate transfer expectations.  
• Reward transfer. | • Make it clear that the organization has expectations for sexual misconduct training beyond just attending.  
• Clearly define what constitutes sexual misconduct.  
• Hold company leaders and first line managers responsible for role modeling professional work behaviors.  
• Establish and communicate strategies for reporting.  
• Specify that everyone is accountable for reporting sexual misconduct and positively reinforce those who report.  
• Ensure and communicate that employees can report without retaliation.  
• Reiterate training expectations frequently.  
• Require trainees to sign a "transfer agreement" to commit to reporting sexual misconduct if encountered. |
| Prescription–identity link | • Individuals may feel that it is not their problem or not their job to get involved in sexual misconduct incidents (i.e., passive bystander mentality). | • Promote favorable attitudes. | • Provide multiple methods and sources for effective reporting.  
• Describe actual reporting failures that have led to disastrous consequences in the past.  
• Highlight the opportunity to actively contribute to a safe, ethically responsible work environment.  
• Encourage employees to report in an autonomous manner. |
| Identity–event link | • Individuals may believe that reporting sexual misconduct will not make a difference, or that reporting will result in negative consequences. | • Provide post-training support and resources. | • Create a system for effectively reporting misconduct and periodically report aggregate outcomes to top leaders.  
• Provide readily accessible resources such as job aids, refresher training, and regular reminders (digitally and visually throughout the workplace).  
• Train first-line supervisors on effectively responding to various forms of reporting. |
accomplishing the trained task. A recent report exemplifies the importance of making expectations surrounding the transfer of sexual misconduct clear; across Wall Street, men are choosing to stay away from women because they fear getting accused of sexual harassment (Tan & Porzecanski, 2018). This behavior is affecting not only women’s careers, as fewer other women are available for mentorship in higher positions, but it is also hurting other men, as their attempts to avoid sexual harassment accusations simultaneously increases the chance of sex discrimination allegations, due to their refusal to help women advance in their careers. This behavior might be stemming from ambiguity pertaining to what constitutes sexual misconduct and how actual incidents will be handled, as well as a desire to skirt accountability by avoiding women completely. It is therefore critical for organizations to communicate their expectations not only about misconduct behaviors but about everyone being responsible for transferring sexual misconduct training, regardless of attempts to “stay out of it” (and remain a passive bystander).

Once established, expectations for transferring sexual misconduct training should be aligned with the reward system to convey that they are valued by the organization. Sufficient opportunities to apply new skills at work are typically essential for transfer to occur (Burke & Hutchins, 2007), yet reporting sexual misconduct is not a frequent job responsibility or possible to practice on a regular basis. Because transfer might not seem relevant to their core jobs, trainees might shift their focus to primary job requirements and disregard the importance of the training goals. Moreover, supervisors would not be closely examining a worker’s reports of sexual misconduct, and employees would need to be able to customize their responses according to the situation. Therefore, it is important to promptly acknowledge timely reporting of misconduct so that employees know that they have appropriately applied the misconduct training and that investing in transferring their training resulted in no negative personal consequences. “Rewarding” the employee by taking their reporting seriously will help reinforce the importance of transferring training, particularly because their immediate supervisor may not be involved in the reporting process. Reinforcement should also allow for a range of responses (e.g., confiding in person, reporting anonymously) because these situations do not always involve one clear-cut path.

At the same time, organizations should also ensure that employees will not be penalized, either formally or informally, for reporting sexual misconduct (Grossman & Burke-Smalley, 2018). Sexual misconduct is a sensitive topic, and employees should feel safe when reporting. Negative consequences associated with reports of sexual misconduct being ignored, such as in the Sandusky case, would decrease others’ willingness to take responsibility for reporting future incidents. Supervisors and the HR department should consistently reiterate the content of misconduct training and its importance to ensure that employees are reminded of the issue, because it is not encountered frequently in all workplaces.

**Prescription–identity link**

Cultivating favorable attitudes toward the use of knowledge and skills gained from sexual misconduct training can encourage employees to incorporate it into their identities, thus establishing the prescription–identity link. Supervisors could encourage positive attitudes about reporting sexual misconduct by using anonymous examples of effective reporting within the organization or incidents in other organizations. Examples of failures of other organizations that led to disastrous consequences, such as the Sandusky case, can also be informative. It is extremely important for employees to know that their organization holds a positive attitude toward reporting of sexual misconduct and that it is safe to report it when encountered or observed. Therefore, applauding successful reporting and criticizing failure of addressing sexual misconduct can help increase employees’ perceived utility of transferring trained skills. Because supervisors are not closely instructing them on the task, exhibiting positive attitudes toward reporting in an autonomous
manner can help further motivate employees to take initiative. More broadly, positive attitudes can be fostered by highlighting how employees have an opportunity to personally contribute to a professional, safe, and ethically responsible work environment by transferring the misconduct training.

Identity–event link
As noted by Medeiros and Griffith (2019), employees’ self-efficacy can play an important role in determining whether they report sexual misconduct. Employees must feel they personally have control over such transfer-relevant actions for the identity–event link to be established. Organizations can buttress this personal control and self-efficacy by giving employees a means through which they can successfully report misconduct. For example, if employees have to jump through many bureaucratic hoops to report misconduct or find that nothing was done once they reported, they will not feel confident that transferring learned skills will have any impact. Organizations should provide various resources to facilitate transfer of sexual misconduct training, such as informational job aids and refresher training, and should regularly remind employees about both the learned skills and the importance of a safe and professional work environment (e.g., online or email reminders, learning aids posted throughout the workplace and on desktop screens). Lack of self-efficacy could also be contributing to the current situation on Wall Street; if employees perceived control over the situation and believed that sexual misconduct could be addressed successfully, they might not avoid interacting with women based on fear of incidents being mishandled.

Conclusions
Addressing sexual harassment in the workplace emerged as the number-one issue in Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology’s (SIOP’s) Top 10 Workplace Trends for 2018 and is currently at the forefront of the broader public’s attention. Medeiros and Griffith (2019) explored how I-O psychologists can contribute through workplace training. We added to the discussion by highlighting accountability as a critical factor for promoting transfer of training, particularly given the sensitive and ambiguous nature of training focused on sexual misconduct. We encourage both researchers and practitioners to pay greater attention to the accountability concept and how it can be used to ensure that employees are not just “checking the box” by attending sexual misconduct training but then assuming that it is “not their job” to engage in the monitoring and reporting process. Rather, every employee in the organization should be encouraged to take personal responsibility for generating an ethical, respectful, and professional work environment.

References
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