

COMMENTARY

One size does not fit all: Taking trainees' personal characteristics into consideration in sexual harassment and racial discrimination training

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Sexual harassment and racial discrimination training often fails. In their focal article, Hayes et al. (2020) summarize some of the limitations of organizational training in decreasing sexual harassment and/or discriminative behaviors in the workplace. They briefly present some of the prerequisites for effective training yet leave little room for explaining how these conditions are often unrealized. In addition, Hayes et al. focus mainly on training itself, as a rather isolated process, although there is wide agreement in the literature that such an “atomic approach” is likely to be ineffective unless it is part of an encompassing attempt to bring about organizational change. Adopting Schein's (1992) model for organizational change, we capitalize on Hayes et al.'s work to demonstrate how some of the principals of effective training could be better introduced and practiced in organizations. Based on Schein's (1992) terminology, when exposed to a program intended to change attitudes or behavior, individuals and groups often demonstrate “resistance to change,” which emanates from “learning anxiety.” To succeed in facilitating change, organizations should reduce the learning anxiety of their employees as much as possible (Schein, 1992). How can this be done? First, greater attention to the complex *hidden* forces that drive unwillingness to learn, both at the individual and the organizational levels, may make efforts to implement effective interventions more successful.

“Tailoring the suit”—taking trainees' characteristics into consideration

One of the main reasons that sexual harassment and racial discrimination training often fails is because organizations tend to apply a “one-size-fits-all” approach. Less attention (if any) is given to trainees' characteristics, even though personal—internal—motivation is one of the most important factors determining training effectiveness (Bell et al., 2017). Mandatory training directed at all employees is prone to resistance, lack of interest, or low motivation to learn. Adopting a personalized approach that considers trainees' characteristics helps employees accommodate training and so increases effectiveness.

Acknowledgment of personal bias

To harness the involvement of the learner in the learning process, personal biases should be taken into account; many people are unaware of the possibility of harboring discriminatory attitudes toward others. Hayes et al. (2020) raise the issue of implicit biases as a potential obstacle to effective learning but do not offer a viable intervention. Although most people do not intentionally or consciously discriminate against others, having to undertake a mandatory training session may

result in built-in resistance. Facing one's implicit beliefs may have an important role in the acknowledgment of bias (Hahn & Gawronski, 2019) and motivation to learn.

Science offers valid tools for testing unconscious attitudes. One of the most well-known tests is the Implicit Association Test (IAT; Greenwald et al., 1998), which measures the response to positive or negative words presented simultaneously with words associated with certain social groups—for example, Afro-American or White people, male or female, young or old. This is a short, simple, widely accessible self-test that can be executed from any computer anonymously. As a preliminary stage to formal training, this will raise the learner's awareness that he or she may hold stereotypical attitudes toward a certain group in the organization. Such a starting point can be a “reason” for learning that is expected to increase learners' internal motivation and turn a general/mandatory training requirement into personalized, engaging learning that is tailor made and may also contribute to a change in hidden attitudes (Ebert et al., 2009).

Beliefs and attitudes influencing motivation

Personal (hidden) beliefs and attitudes seem to play a major role in predicting employees' motivation for training (pretraining) and their willingness to transfer their learning to everyday working lives (post-training; Bell et al., 2017). For example, individuals vary in their mindsets, from believing that people are malleable and can develop over time—a “growth” mindset—to believing that people cannot change—a “fixed” mindset (Dweck, 1999). A recent study has suggested that minorities who choose to voice their feelings after an assault and believe that the perpetrator can change his or her behavior demonstrate more favorable attitudes toward their workplace (Rattan & Dweck, 2018). Thus, a growth mindset may contribute to successful workplace sexual harassment and diversity training implementation. Programs that focus on growth-mindset employees, or interventions that induce a growth mindset (e.g., Martocchio, 1994), may facilitate greater change than forcing all employees to take part.

Other individual characteristics singled out as predictors of training effectiveness include self-efficacy, learning goal orientation, cognitive capabilities, conscientiousness, and employees' perception of their work environment (Tziner et al., 2007). Therefore, for sexual harassment and racial discrimination training to be effective it needs to be designed with prior evaluation of individual characteristics and perceptions of the trainees.

What's in it for me?

Another possible intervention is strengthening the applicability of the topic to employees' role (“What's in it for me?”—WIFM). This way, the motivation to undergo the training would emerge not only from prevention of possible violations but also from motivation to perform better following the training. Employees show resilience, affective commitment, and behavioral change even when engaged in repetitive, low-interest tasks once they understand the true, meaningful impact of their actions (Grant et al., 2007). Using data to show how diversity correlates with better financial performance of firms and explaining the rationale for why diversity has a positive impact on organizational performance (Hunt et al., 2015) can strengthen the WIFM motivation.

Providing choice

“Blended learning” is the combination of several learning methods (face-to-face, e-learning, on-the-job training) and time and place of learning. It is based on the idea of flexibility and on maximizing each learning method strength. Blended learning is widely used today to combine different technologies and pedagogical approaches (Kristanto, 2017). Aligned with theories of motivation such as self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2002), choice was shown to build autonomy and internal motivation in the learning process (Evans & Boucher, 2015).

Accounting for demographics

Another dimension that should be acknowledged is demographics—taking factors such as gender and age of participants into consideration. A systematic review by Roehling and Huang (2018) suggests that gender seems to play an important role in predicting sexual harassment training outcomes. Specifically, a recent report demonstrated that programs seem to work better in workplaces with more women managers, who are less likely than men to respond negatively to harassment complaints and training (Dobbin & Kalev, 2019). Men, especially White men, on the other hand, may feel excluded and become defensive regarding sexual harassment or diversity training programs (e.g., Dobbin & Kalev, 2019; Emerson, 2017).

The need to be more attuned to trainees' needs also comes from the changing nature of the workforce. Recent years have welcomed diversified groups to organizations such as millennials and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) employees. Millennials, who perceive work, sexual behavior, and responsibility differently than previous generations (Stark, 2015), or LGBT employees who face both gender and heterosexist harassment (Rabelo & Cortina, 2014), call for better adaptation of training programs to their needs (Quick & McFadyen, 2017).

The importance of partnership and alliance

One of the main dangers in applying sexual harassment and racial discrimination training is that it may yield counterintuitive results, such as strengthening stereotypical assumptions, feelings of resentment against women or minorities, or even facilitate retaliation (Dobbin & Kalev, 2019). When employees feel alienated, skeptical, or threatened as the training starts, they may fail to constructively engage in learning or unconsciously act against it. Most training models agree that a sense of autonomy, intrinsic motivation, and self-mastery are essential to the success of (any) training program (e.g., Bell et al., 2017).

For example, most sexual harassment programs are mandatory, their curriculum is legal in nature, and much emphasis is put on sexual harassment grievance procedures (Dobbin & Kalev, 2019). Moreover, trainees are often forced to conform to one standardized program usually designed by professionals and that treats them as potential perpetrators, eliciting intimidation, retaliation, and even backlash (Dobbin & Kalev, 2018, 2019). Adopting a participative approach, on the other hand, may yield better results.

First, as suggested by Dobbin and Kalev (2019, p. 5), “management allies may be the key.” Recruiting top and middle management levels as strategic partners in leading the change creates a necessary coalition that provides not only the resources needed but also signifies its value. Indeed, studies suggest that organizational efforts that apply the use of diversity managers and task forces have strong positive effects (Dobbin & Kalev, 2015). Second, training research suggests that the more trainees feel like allies, the more they are willing to transfer the knowledge and skills to their everyday experiences after the training (Bell et al., 2017). Thus, inviting employees and managers to take part in creating, designing, or adapting the training to organizational needs is fundamental. Finally, adopting the language and content of the training itself could derive greater commitment and engagement. For example, emphasizing the subjects' importance; focusing on the trainees' responsibility, ability, and ways to change the situation; eliciting empathy; and better communication skills were all found to improve training effectiveness (Madera et al., 2011; McCann, 2018).

Incorporating training into larger organizational climate change

To conclude, as mentioned by Hayes et al. (2020), there is wide agreement in the literature that training alone cannot facilitate sustainable change, with which we concur:

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. (McCann, 2018, p. 26)

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