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COMMENTARY

Don't forget the role of civility interventions in workplace sexual harassment

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As researchers who have studied sexual harassment training effectiveness, we concur with Medeiros and Griffith (2019) that it is imperative to rigorously evaluate the utility of such interventions. This is true of outcomes over the long term that, as the authors acknowledge, are especially in need of research. Medeiros and Griffith rightly emphasize that the training environment must support sexual harassment training for the training to have a beneficial impact. The broader literature on training effectiveness supports this assertion (e.g., Colquitt, LePine, & Noe, 2000; Kozlowski, Chao, & Jensen, 2009).

However, we also propose that sexual harassment training presents a kind of quandary that we believe is not fully captured by Medeiros and Griffith (2019). Organizations that could benefit the most from sexual harassment training arguably include those organizations for which sexual harassment is most frequent. It is within these organizations that *organizational tolerance for sexual harassment* is high. When organizational tolerance for sexual harassment is high, policies, practices, and procedures convey implicit and explicit acceptance of sexually harassing behaviors (Williams, Fitzgerald, & Drasgow, 1999). For example, employees may be unaware of the existence of any policy regarding sexual harassment, there may be no anonymous and supportive channels through which to report sexual harassment, and/or—most likely—employees may engage in harassment without any consistent and forceful accountability. Indeed meta-analysis shows that organizational tolerance for sexual harassment is among the best predictors of the incidence of workplace sexual harassment (Willness, Steel, & Lee, 2007).

Organizational tolerance for sexual harassment is a climate-like construct with wide reaching tentacles and the capability to stifle sexual harassment training effectiveness at all stages of the process. Organizational tolerance for sexual harassment impedes pretraining motivation to learn on the part of trainees by driving employees to be more pessimistic about sexual harassment change (e.g., the belief that attempts to reduce sexual harassment will be ineffective; Walsh, Bauerle, & Magley, 2013). Employees may also view their organization's intentions for providing training as disingenuous when organizational tolerance is high. Given the harm done to training motivation, such cynicism and pessimism stemming from organizational tolerance for sexual harassment are likely to hinder progress during training. For instance, Cheung, Goldberg, King, and Magley (2018) showed that cynicism about sexual harassment change and the perceived ethical climate of the organization interacted such that the poorest sexual harassment training outcomes were evident when ethical climate was low and cynicism was high. We suspect that organizational tolerance for sexual harassment is also likely to inhibit transfer of sexual harassment training knowledge and skills to the workplace following training, regardless of the more general organizational training climate (Tracey & Tews, 2005). Perry, Kulik, and Field (2009) assert that "positive transfer is less likely in organizations where the climate is more tolerant of sexual harassment" (p. 824).

Therein lies the quandary: Decreased organizational tolerance for sexual harassment is a desired long-term outcome of training, but high tolerance for sexual harassment inhibits the effectiveness of sexual harassment training. So what is an organization to do when leaders genuinely want to bring about culture change with respect to sexual harassment? One somewhat radical possibility may be to avoid sexual harassment training. To be clear, we are not suggesting that training be abandoned altogether. Instead we believe that organizations need to work to build a culture and climate where dignity and respect are the norm (Walsh et al., 2012). Training can and should play a key role in this process—though it should by no means be the only initiative—but we believe that the attention paid to training should be in the form of *workplace civility training*.

Workplace civility is positive behavior that serves to build and reinforce prosocial norms of mutual respect at work (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Civility involves conveying regard, kindness, dignity, and respect to all. Workplace civility training is similar to, yet different from, workplace sexual harassment training. Workplace civility training has a positive valence, emphasizing knowledge and skill building to facilitate positive and respectful interactions at work. Civility training can help to establish norms for mutual respect by emphasizing appropriate and inappropriate conduct, delineating the benefits of civility and respect, and giving people the tools to navigate challenging interpersonal interactions, thereby squashing out *in*civility (i.e., rudeness and disrespect; Andersson & Pearson, 1999) when it occurs. By helping to eliminate workplace incivility, it is likely that workplace civility training will also eliminate sexual harassment given the inherent connection between these destructive behaviors. The empirical research finds a direct connection between incivility and gender harassment (Lim & Cortina, 2005), which is the most common form of sexual harassment (Magley, Waldo, Drasgow, & Fitzgerald, 1999). By extension, ending gender harassment could have the greatest effect on ending all forms of sexual harassment.

We are not alone in our call to encourage the use of workplace civility training to prevent sexual harassment. Others have also made this connection (cf., Cortina et al., 2002; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018; Roehling & Huang, 2017), including the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) in their report by the select task force on the study of harassment in the workplace (Feldblum & Lipnic, 2016). In their words,

> The beauty of workplace civility training is that it is focused on the positive—what employees and managers should do, rather than on what they should not do. In addition, by appealing to all individuals in the workplace, regardless of social identity or perceived proclivity to harass, civility training might avoid some of the resistance met by interventions exclusively targeting harassment. (Feldblum & Lipnic, 2016, p. 55)

Ultimately, we believe that employees may be more receptive to and more motivated to engage in workplace civility training. We also believe that civility training can be an important tool to address sexual harassment. But just as there is a need for research on sexual harassment training, there also exists the need to evaluate the long-term benefits of workplace civility training. Given the many challenges present in attempting to bring about culture change in organizations that tolerate sexual harassment, we suggest that researchers and practitioners not ignore the role of workplace civility training in order to quash sexual harassment.

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