CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

COMMENTARY

Improving sexual harassment and sexual assault training effectiveness by aligning training efforts with business strategy

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In their focal article on how industrial and organizational (I-O) psychologists can extend the conversation on sexual harassment and sexual assault via workplace training, Medeiros and Griffith (2019) discuss important considerations for designing the training programs to promote transfer and improve evaluation of key outcomes. The authors briefly discuss needs assessment and its associated components—organization analysis, task analysis, and person analysis—noting a range of issues that may be revealed at any of the three stages of analysis. We agree with all of the elements discussed in that section; however, we think that one particularly important component of the organization analysis—link to strategy—was not explicitly discussed. Here, we argue that linking organizational learning and training efforts to business strategy is well positioned to play a very critical role in the overall effectiveness of sexual harassment and assault training.

A thorough needs assessment is crucial to ensuring training effectiveness and efficiency (Brown, 2002), and organization analysis is a vital piece to that assessment: "Organization analysis involves determining the appropriateness of training given the organization's strategic goals, environment, resources, and characteristics" (Brown, 2017, p. 1647). As this definition indicates, the organization's strategic goals should guide planning for and carrying out necessary employee training. For training to be effective, it must support organizational strategy, ensuring that training objectives are directly aligned. Everything from the type of training needed to ensuring that resources are in place to meet training needs to securing buy-in from members of the organization and management are dependent on the overall strategic goals of the company. Ultimately, the aim is to provide employee training that will help execute company strategy (Smith, 2008).

Establishing the link between sexual harassment training and organizational goals—such as improving workplace climate, higher productivity, or improved organizational reputation—provides a number of notable benefits both for those wishing to implement the training (i.e., I-O psychologists, HR professionals, training personnel) and for the organization and its members. As indicated above, strategic alignment of training not only ensures that training supports the organization's mission and facilitates the attainment of organizational goals (e.g., Arthur, Bennett, Edens, & Bell, 2003; Reed & Vakola, 2006) but also helps to secure management support and corresponding resources, which are crucial in the training design process and in ensuring the success of training.

At the onset of training, in particular, the importance of organizational buy-in and garnering adequate resources cannot be overstated (Noe, 2017). Not only do senior leaders have the authority to institute training policies and practices, but meta-analytic results demonstrate that organizational buy-in established during organization analysis, and management support in particular, enhance trainees' motivation to learn and to apply learned skills on the job (Colquitt,

LePine, & Noe, 2000), both of which constitute key steps in any instructional system design. In a related vein, training resources are often limited and can thus be difficult to obtain from senior leaders. Yet, training resources flow more readily from leaders who are in support of the training and recognize the business case and strategic value of the initiative. Again, sufficient resources are required prior to developing any training intervention, particularly for such a seemingly chronic issue as sexual harassment/assault.

Strategically aligned training programs may further benefit the design process by increasing employee and organizational readiness for change. For example, prior work has shown that clarity of training goals, particularly when linked to the organizational mission and organizational goals, can reduce resistance to change (e.g., Lehman, Greener, & Simpson, 2002). Indeed, there may be strong resistance to changing the status quo of a sexual harassment/assault workplace culture. Scholars have also emphasized that external pressure—such as potential or impending legal mandates—enhance readiness to change as well (Lehman et al., 2002), supporting the case for alignment of training goals with both company and societal initiatives.

Yet other design considerations, namely evaluation and transfer components, may benefit from a strategic perspective. Best I-O psychology practices have long guided us to tie our evaluation criteria back to training objectives (e.g., Arthur et al., 2003; Robinson & Robinson, 1989). Accordingly, by establishing the business case for training early in the design process, training professionals enable the collection of business-related evaluation criteria including Kirkpatrick's behavior- and results-oriented evaluation indicators. In the context of initiatives focused on reducing sexual harassment and assault, behavioral outcomes may include attitudes toward sexual harassment and assault, improved recognition of inappropriate behavior, skill in mitigating escalating harassment, and enhanced interpersonal exchanges and teamwork, among others. Potential results outcomes, such as increased incident reporting, reduced grievances, reduced absenteeism and turnover, bolstered culture and quality perceptions, and corresponding recruitment success, are likely to further demonstrate the business case for harassment and assault training.

Such results-type criteria tend to be favored by managers and increase perceptions of training effectiveness (Aguinis & Kraiger, 2009), contribute to the continued allocation of company resources to training initiatives (Mattson, 2005), and may even lead government policymakers to subsidize organizational costs through external resource allocation (Bartel, 2000). Indeed, evidence suggests that strategically aligned programs may very well warrant additional investment. For example, both top management support and resource availability, discussed prior with respect to their relation to strategic alignment, have been shown to lead to effective program implementation and, in turn, to shape a positive climate for transfer (Klein, Conn, & Sorra, 2001). More directly, Montesino (2002) demonstrated that training transfer is highest when trainees perceive a strong link between the training program and the organization's strategic direction. In this regard, attending to strategic elements in the training context enhances pre-training and post-training processes.

Beyond benefits to the training design process, strategic training initiatives offer advantages to key stakeholders as well as to the broader organization. Specifically, strategically aligned developmental opportunities tend to yield greater job security, performance, and advancement opportunities for employees (Garavan, 2007). Such programs can also communicate to employees how their individual needs and development are connected to organizational goals and strategy (Reed & Vakola, 2006). In this way, establishing the business case for a sexual harassment intervention may reduce feelings among trainees that they are being unfairly targeted as individuals, instead emphasizing the complexity of the topic and the need to address it within the organization as a whole.

Stakeholders who benefit from such efforts span beyond employees, moreover, to customers, suppliers, and investors or owners. For example, customers and suppliers are likely to witness improved quality in the products, services, and standards offered by an organization, whereas owners and investors may experience corresponding growth, financial gains, and an enhanced reputation (Aguinis & Kraiger, 2009; Garavan, 2007) as a result of strategically aligning sexual harassment and assault training programs.

From an organizational perspective, scholars have argued that strategic alignment with human resource practices, and training initiatives in particular, yield favorable outcomes across organizational levels. Introducing his strategic human resource development (HRD) model, for example, Garavan (2007) indicated that a strategic approach (a) aids in the development of core capabilities needed to develop and maintain a competitive advantage; (b) allows firms to capitalize on existing capabilities and to better cope with change; (c) aligns organizational strategies with HR systems, practices, and stakeholders at multiple organizational levels; and (d) incorporates existing as well as emergent strategies.

Of relevance to the present discussion, moreover, is the utility of strategic HRD initiatives in addressing sensitive topics such as ethics, diversity, and safety, and in doing so in light of broader policy development and mandates (Hutchins & Wang, 2008). When left unchecked, issues such as these may result in organizational or even industry crises. Conversely, implementing strategic training initiatives to educate employees about such topics, among them sexual harassment and assault, facilitates crisis readiness vis-à-vis greater awareness and capability with respect to crisis management (Wang, Hutchins, & Garavan, 2009). As discussed in greater detail to follow, this also emphasizes a shift from a reactive ("compliance") to a proactive ("business case") approach to training.

With more states requiring sexual harassment training and court rulings that favor such efforts, it is understandable how sexual harassment training would be approached as a legal rather than a strategic imperative. Indeed, to the extent such training is mandated, organizational leaders may be unlikely to consider it to be a strategic advantage when their competitors are required to do it as well. Yet, another key advantage of I-O psychologists aligning sexual harassment and sexual assault training with organizational strategy is that it provides the infrastructure to shift from a "compliance" perspective, where such training is conducted to mitigate legal liability, to a "business case" perspective, where such training is conducted to enhance workplace climate and maximize key business objectives.

Consider how the focus on workplace diversity (broadly defined) expanded from a social justice perspective to a "business case for diversity" (Konrad, 2006) that asserts businesses that are not able to attract, retain, and manage a diverse workforce would be ineffective or unsustainable in today's economy. The business case for diversity argues it is to an organization's strategic advantage to create a multicultural, inclusive (Shore et al., 2011) environment because it makes the organization more attractive to top talent and responsive and in-tune to diverse consumers/clients, as well as enhances innovation and organizational performance. A growing body of empirical research supports the business case argument that diverse teams and organizations operating within a diversity-inclusive environment will yield positive outcomes, including bottom-line outcomes such as work performance (Sabharwal, 2014) and firm performance (Boehm, Kunze, & Bruch, 2014).

One particular aspect of diversity, gender, has received a substantial amount of research attention, particularly with respect to environments that are not conducive to gender diversity, in which sexual harassment is tolerated. Our I-O psychology literature is replete with evidence of the consequences of sexual harassment on individual outcomes, such as poorer mental health, higher stress, and lower job and life satisfaction (e.g., Fitzgerald, Dragow, Hulin, Gelfand, & Magley, 1997; Schneider, Swan, & Fitzgerald, 1997), as well as organizational outcomes, including absenteeism and productivity consequences (e.g., Stockdale, 1998). Early research identified organizational precursors to sexual harassment, such as cultures that tolerate sexual harassment (Hulin, Fitzgerald, & Dragow, 1996).

Avoiding these negative outcomes is certainly compelling, yet, growing evidence indicates that a culture that promotes gender inclusion (Nishii, 2013) is associated with several positive outcomes, such as enhanced recruitment and reputation as well as firm performance (Richard, Kirby, & Chadwich, 2013). Indeed, this research supports a business case for gender diversity and inclusiveness that is the diametric opposite of a climate that tolerates or perpetuates sexual harassment in the workplace. To the extent our field can align our training to not only reduce or avoid the negative outcomes but to enhance the strategic goals of an organization, such as the positive outcomes associated with a gender inclusive organizational

culture, our training efforts will have a much stronger and sustainable impact on preventing sexual harassment in the workplace.

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