


COMMENTARY

Changing the narrative on harassment and discrimination training: Building an organizational culture with healthy professional boundaries

Sara Jansen Perry* 

Baylor University

*Corresponding author. Email: sara_perry@baylor.edu

For the past few years, I have worked with organizations to conduct training aimed at preventing the harassment and discrimination behaviors described by the focal article by Hayes et al. (2020). I share here an alternative approach I have taken in these efforts, applying expertise from industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology to build positive and healthy organizational culture. I have taken this approach, because, knowing that employees typically perceive harassment and discrimination training as an empty form of liability protection that does not really influence their day-to-day life (Bezrukova et al., 2016; Hayes et al., 2020; Medeiros & Griffith, 2019), I was not eager to participate in this stigmatized professional pursuit, even when invited by notable organizations (Antecol & Cobb-Clark, 2003). My primary role is a scholar in an academic position, so I only accepted this challenge when I was able to apply my research and teaching expertise to shift the narrative, allowing for more positive experiences for trainers and trainees alike. In short, I suggest that when shared norms, purpose, and values of an organization (i.e., culture) become the focus of harassment and discrimination training, leaders can lay the foundation for significant and lasting change in relation to these critical issues while also minimizing the apathy, cynicism, and even deviance that otherwise result (Ambrose et al., 2002; Bezrukova et al., 2016; Steele & Vandello, 2019).

More employees suffer from a hostile work environment (i.e., ongoing, relatively minor harassment or discrimination events, often embedded in a toxic organizational culture) than from the more extreme events typically depicted in the news. A hostile work environment often manifests because leaders or employees simply lack awareness of the definition and need for *professional boundaries*. By changing the training narrative to focus on professional boundaries as the foundation of a healthy organizational culture, organizations can overcome shortcomings of past training efforts (Colquitt et al., 2000) and prevent offensive incidents from multiplying into a more serious situation. Professional boundaries delineate appropriate versus inappropriate behaviors at work and among organizational stakeholders. The goal is to help people discern, replace, and/or appropriately address explicit or potentially illegal behaviors, behaviors that may be misinterpreted or unappreciated by some members of an organization, and any other unprofessional behaviors that may simply be inappropriate, all of which contribute to an unhealthy organizational culture. The need for this type of training may be particularly critical in organizations dealing with certain sectors of the workforce (e.g., younger workers, high-turnover industries; Antecol & Cobb-Clark, 2003). New or nontraditional leaders may also need

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education about how professional boundaries can protect them from doing anything that can be mischaracterized in their higher-level roles. But all members of the workforce can benefit from education of the importance of professional boundaries as part of a larger conversation on healthy organizational culture (Preusser et al., 2011).

The following sections outline this culture-based approach, delineating the framework I have used with positive results in organizations. I discuss theoretically informed best practices in two categories as components of training design: content and logistics. I close with a brief discussion of training evaluation and implications for research and teaching.

Training content

The culture-based messaging I propose can instill excitement about the organization and what it can represent for all stakeholders, empowering participants to individually and collectively make an impact in fostering a great workplace. Essentially this approach is “substituting negative attitudes with positive ones,” as suggested by Hayes et al. (2020, p. 126), by replacing a negative, avoidance, compliance-focused narrative with a positive, approach, culture-focused narrative (Coats et al., 1996). The following outline of content is provided only as a guideline and should be customized to each organization’s unique culture, mission, workforce, and training needs.

Definitions and examples of healthy cultures with appropriate professional boundaries are a good starting point rather than starting with negative and/or extreme examples of harassment or discrimination. Examples of minor violations of professional boundaries can be helpful (and entertaining) conversation starters, including the audience in dialogue about where certain behaviors fit on the appropriateness spectrum, particularly for those that are ambiguous. Once rapport has been established, more serious examples of violations can be shared in conjunction with other typical elements of harassment or discrimination training (e.g., definitions, relevant headlines to help the audience see the broader implications, a discussion about who is harmed, and organizational policies and procedures for violations and reporting).

Next, participants need to be trained to be “good bystanders” to emphasize everyone’s critical role in building a healthy organizational culture (Lee et al., 2019). Replacing “what *not* to do” with “what *to* do” can be helpful and motivational (e.g., giving actual scripts about what to say and do in various situations, who to involve, and in what order to involve key stakeholders). Conflict management principles and procedures are important to share here as well. For example, if a bystander witnesses a professional boundary violation, he or she should first privately ask the alleged victim if he or she was bothered by it. If not, then perhaps no further action is needed. But if the victim did feel violated, the bystander can become an advocate for that colleague as he or she follows the proper resolution process, including talking with the accused perpetrator and reporting to HR at the appropriate time. Similarly, this training should provide tools for effectively speaking with someone who has crossed a professional boundary. Participants should also be given actions they can take if they do not feel confident in approaching the accused perpetrator. In sum, this portion of the training should combine education on standard HR policies with professional skills training to empower all members to foster a healthy culture with professional boundaries throughout the organization, without instilling fear, distrust, or oversensitivity.

The final major component of this training is building awareness across individual, cultural, and role differences. This can be invaluable to helping participants better understand themselves and others, equipping them to function more effectively in daily work life (Lacerenza et al., 2017). Participants should engage in guided small group discussions about differences that may lead people to define boundaries differently, which help participants understand ways to speak and behave with coworkers that will uphold professional boundaries (for example, how to give compliments to colleagues by focusing on tasks, rather than on personal appearance; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). These discussions reinforce how professional boundaries can help all coexist in a healthy organizational culture that respects and protects each member, even while allowing each

organization to maintain its unique approach to building connections among employees and each employee to maintain his/her unique identity. These discussions can also help participants see what happens when differing perspectives and preferences collide within an organization that does not have healthy professional boundaries.

In closing the training, the facilitator should reinforce the important role that professional boundaries play to protect all within a healthy organizational culture. It is paramount that these messages are customized to the organization's existing culture and workforce, embracing the unique ways the organization's leaders want people to interact but also establishing clear guidance about how professional boundaries can improve even the most unique culture. It is also important to ensure that participants do not leave the training feeling like they are being watched for every misstep but instead that they are active participants in fostering this healthy culture. Group discussion and participant sharing about lessons learned and what professional boundaries now mean to them after going through this training experience are good ways to end on a positive and motivational note.

Logistical training principles

Carefully planned in-person training with interactions among organizational members is critical for this alternative approach. Particularly for difficult topics like harassment and discrimination, an in-person experience will enhance satisfaction and application by participants far more than independent online training with little to no discussion or interaction (Antecol & Cobb-Clark, 2003; Lacerenza et al., 2017). This format also communicates that leaders have prioritized these topics as ongoing conversations, meant to foster a healthy workplace that promotes well-being, engagement, and impact within a strong community of employees (i.e., the definition of healthy organizational culture); it is not an annual compliance checklist. A logistical question often raised is whether this training should be mandatory or voluntary (Bezrukova et al., 2016), but this distinction becomes less relevant with this alternative approach. Instead, this becomes an opportunity for team members to sharpen their professional skills while building strong teams.

Multiple methods should be used for delivery to maximize retention and application (Bezrukova et al., 2016). Lecture interspersed with video clips and role plays will stimulate discussion about key principles. These methods can teach skills for recognizing, replacing, and addressing behavior that is counter to the desired organizational culture. Small group discussion can also help participants verbally process and connect with others while applying concepts to their shared work experience. These discussions can foster shared appreciation of professional boundaries as the basis of a strong organizational culture. This format is particularly useful when building awareness of differences across individuals, as people can connect even in their differences, improving their understanding and connection with each other.

Polling can be integrated throughout the training to enhance richness of interaction and discussion. All answers can be collected and shared anonymously, either electronically (e.g., PollEverywhere™) or with sticky notes or index cards, giving participants an opportunity to react to others' input. Good polling topics early in the session include the current culture and boundaries, as well as initial perceptions about the meaning of professional boundaries. Polling can also be used when teaching discrimination and harassment concepts to quiz participants about what behaviors would be (in)appropriate, (il)legal, or perhaps questionable in certain situations. When behaviors in gray areas are mentioned, ensuing discussion can be lively as the group refines its definition of professional boundaries within its unique organizational context. Closing the session with a final poll question about "what professional boundaries mean to me and my organization's culture" can be a powerful testament to the learning and awareness that has developed through the session.

A final logistical consideration is timing. This type of training should be delivered as part of employee onboarding and should be revisited in team-building and periodic organization-wide

events designed to enhance the culture while energizing employees and leaders for working toward the organizational mission. The language of *professional boundaries* should be reinforced in daily organizational life, including in leader and HR communications, and with explicit refreshers built into the employee lifecycle to continue to motivate all members to embrace these principles as they uphold a healthy organizational culture. When critical incidents have occurred, this type of training can also foster reconciliation and buy in for moving forward.

Training evaluation and benefits

In using this alternative approach to training, I consistently see appreciation by participants for the safety offered by an organizational culture with healthy professional boundaries, with improved understanding of the protection offered by the end of the training. Participants also express gratitude for open discussion on these topics. Increased awareness and confidence about how to help promote a healthy organizational culture is another often-vocalized benefit, which goes beyond civility training or simple teambuilding (Walsh & Magley, 2019). The language of professional boundaries should be further integrated throughout the organizational culture via employee engagement surveys and annual performance reviews, which allow for evaluation of long-term effectiveness of this approach. Objective data can also be collected through HR reporting metrics, comparing frequency and content of complaints before and after the training. Insufficient integration throughout the organization can result in increased complaints after 3 to 6 months, particularly if turnover is high and onboarding does not include discussion of these topics.

Research and teaching implications

Empirical research is needed to test the effects of this culture-based training approach, both through organizations collecting the data just described and through experimental studies to measure attitudes and intentions when using this method versus the avoidance-based, compliance-focused method of traditional training. I echo Hayes et al. (2020) in calling for more training of HR and I-O psychology students in this approach, leveraging their expertise on organizational culture, empowerment, diversity and inclusion, teambuilding, and conflict resolution. Shifting the narrative to a positive, engaging, and ongoing experience will benefit organizations by building healthy, strong cultures that can protect and empower employees to collectively work toward their mission and thrive in the process.

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