Industrial and Organizational Psychology (2020), **13**, 225–229
doi:10.1017/iop.2020.46

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

COMMENTARY

A culture of respect: Leader development and preventing destructive behavior

David M. Wallace*, Celeste Raver Luning, Judith E. Rosenstein, Andrew Ledford, and Barbara Cyr-Roman

United States Naval Academy
*Corresponding author. Email: dmwallac@usna.edu

Although certainly the imposition of training can play a role in both changing individual attitudes and behaviors and developing organizational norms (Aguinis & Kraiger, 2009), training should not be viewed as a restorative reaction to destructive behaviors but rather as one element of a suite of interventions that can help prevent sexual harassment and assault, racial discrimination, and other destructive behaviors both in and out of the workplace. Hayes et al. (2020) consider extant approaches to efforts to respond to destructive behaviors and find them wanting, calling for behavioral scientists to focus on better interventions. We suggest that one of the most important interventions behavioral scientists can focus on is the creation and implementation of leadership development programs that both teach leaders the importance of promoting a culture of acceptance, dignity, and respect, and provide them with the tools to actively and deliberately work with followers to inculcate such a culture.

Individually and organizationally destructive behaviors do not exist in a vacuum. They are undergirded by social, cultural, and psychological factors, of which organizational culture and climate may be among the most important. The basic assumptions and shared values at the core of organizational culture influence organizational practice and climate, collective attitudes, and, ultimately, individual attitudes and behaviors (Ostroff et al., 2013). We advocate that a culture marked by the basic assumptions (a) that we must accept people as autonomous individuals, (b) that human dignity is the right of autonomous individuals, and (c) that all people should be treated with respect can have a strong influence on reducing destructive behaviors, and that leaders should actively and deliberately support and cultivate such a culture.

Leadership has a large positive effect on organizational climate (İşçi et al., 2015), and leaders embed cultural elements into an organization through their attentional priorities, crisis reactions, everyday interactions, and human resources policies (both stated and unstated; Schein, 2010). Put another way, leaders set the tone for what is acceptable and unacceptable conduct. Using the example of sexual harassment (SH) and assault, Sadler and her colleagues have documented how "Officers allowing or initiating sexually demeaning comments or gestures towards female soldiers was associated with a three to four-fold increase in likelihood of rape" (Sadler, Booth, Cook, & Doebbline, 2003, p. 268), whereas when leaders are proactive, set a positive climate, and treat everyone with dignity and respect, then organizations, in turn experienced "lower self-reported frequency of SH, greater satisfaction with the resolution of SH complaints, greater perceived

The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the US Naval Academy, the US Navy, nor of any branch of the federal government of the United States. The authors wish to thank Kelly Welsh, Kevin Mullaney, and Danielle Litchford for their insights and comments.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2020.46 Published online by Cambridge University Press

effectiveness of SH training, and perceptions that the problem of SH was getting better over time" (Sadler, Lindsay, Hunter, & Day, 2018, p. 3). These findings align with findings around ethical leadership theory, which show that leaders who not only set a positive behavioral example but also deliberately and actively promote such behavior can embed an ethical culture through multiple levels of influence (Schaubroeck et al., 2012).

The importance of leaders and leadership highlights the need for leaders who have the ability and motivation to inculcate a culture of acceptance, dignity, and respect as a key aspect of reducing destructive behaviors. We assert that this ability and motivation are not necessarily inherent in leaders; applied behavioral scientists involved in leadership education and development have a role to play in developing leaders who will deliberately and actively cultivate such cultures. In this article, we discuss initiatives for leadership curriculum design and content to promote the development of such leaders.

Essentials of leadership curriculum design

The key instructional design imperative in this approach is that themes of acceptance, dignity, and respect must be a fully integrated into leader development programs and curricula. The impact of one-off lectures on destructive behaviors can appear to students to be ignorable, especially when viewed as a mandatory checkbox response to "political correctness," or, in worse cases, can result in trainee backlash (Kidder et al., 2004). To counter this effect, we advocate for the incorporation into leader development programs of education around acceptance, dignity, and respect to an extent that bears much resemblance to the inculcation of culture; espoused values, policies, priorities, language, rituals, stories, and instruction must all align in the service of creating shared values within the program. In the remainder of this section, we offer some suggestions for implementation of this approach.

Explicit discussions coupled with implicit repetition

Common practice in leadership development relies on an assumption that 70% of leaders' development is rooted in experience, 20% in developmental relationships, and 10% in formal instruction. Despite a lack of empirical evidence for this assumption, it provides a useful framework for leader developers to consider how different modes of instruction should be blended to support cognitive, affective, and behavioral development of leaders (DeRue & Myers, 2014). In teaching leaders to create cultures of acceptance, dignity, and respect, developers should rely in part on formal instruction—that is, the explicit elucidation of theories around the importance of promoting such a culture (and how it can help prevent destructive behaviors)—while also ensuring that developmental relationships and experiences that are part of their programs include elements to reinforce these lessons. Additionally, topics related to acceptance, dignity, and respect should not stand alone in a single lecture but should be interwoven throughout programs, including other formal instruction opportunities.

Modeling behavior of diverse teams working together

Longstanding societal norms and influences have caused ongoing status differences among different demographic groups in organizations. As a result, many leaders may not have been exposed to models of acceptance, dignity, and respect in diverse work teams (Jackson & Joshi, 2011). Social cognitive theory would suggest that the observation of such models in action would serve to help translate theories of culture into implementable models (Bandura, 2005). Leadership development programs should leverage diverse teaching, coaching, and mentoring teams to provide in-person operational models. Case studies are another tool that can be leveraged in this effort, particularly when diverse teams that work well together are modeled in case studies designed around other

https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2020.46 Published online by Cambridge University Press

managerial and leadership topics, underscoring diverse work teams as a natural part of a healthy organization rather than a special case to be studied.

Practice opportunities

Challenging experiences (i.e., those that incorporate novel, uncertain, and/or meaningful stimuli) facilitate the development of interpersonal skills for leaders, particularly when coupled with developmental feedback (DeRue & Wellman, 2009). Some examples of challenging experiences that can help develop skills for building a culture of acceptance, dignity, and respect include the opportunity to practice value-laden communication, to solicit participative leadership from diverse teams, and to engage in difficult conversations with those who demonstrate a potential for destructive behaviors. These opportunities can be incorporated through (for example) role play, developmental assignments in leadership roles, and even interpersonal engagement with individual others.

Assessment

Assessment of learning and development outcomes is an essential element of leadership development as it can both provide feedback to leader participants and inform curricular development for future iterations. Assessments should include both the affective/motivational, cognitive, and behavioral learning outcomes that support the building of skills and also the leadership identity and epistemology changes that undergird the leaders' developmental growth (Wallace et al., 2019). Thus, leader developers should assess leaders' skills for building a culture of acceptance, dignity, and respect, as well as the development of identities and cognitions of leadership that include the leader's role in preventing destructive behaviors through the establishment of such a culture.

Essentials of leadership curriculum content

There are challenges to creating an organizational culture of acceptance, dignity, and respect, including inherent cognitive biases and threats to social identity, as well as a lack of awareness by new leaders of the value and challenges presented by diverse organizations and the importance of paying deliberate attention to organizational culture and climate. Despite the challenges, with the appropriate training, leaders can begin to shift climate and culture to create organizations where SH and racial discrimination are not accepted practices or norms of the organization. In this section, we outline some training content that we believe are essential foundations for leaders to create such a culture.

Cognitive bias, self-awareness, and critical thinking

Individuals enter leadership roles with their own cognitive biases and systematic errors in thinking (Korteling et al., 2018), and they also must deal with organizational members' cognitive biases (Beshears & Gino, 2015). An awareness of these biases and their influences on decision-making processes, as well as the critical thinking skills that can combat them, will aid individuals to act with more deliberation and presence of mind when engaging in behaviors or conversations that could lead to harassment or bias. As such, leadership development should include a focus on self-awareness and engaging in critical thinking processes and deliberate leader behaviors. Education on these topics can help leaders learn to overcome heuristic-based biases. This education should be focused not only on the individual leader but should also include the need to ensure organizational members have the opportunity, the motivation, and the skills to engage in critical thinking.

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Social identity theory

Knowledge of social identity theory, including its roots in uncertainty reduction, self-enhancement, and identity threat reduction, is essential for leaders who want to prevent subgroup identification from becoming a social source of motivation that runs counter to a culture of acceptance, dignity, and respect. Approaches to the development of subgroups and the identity threats that drive destructive behavior targeted at outgroup members are sometimes counterintuitive and require deliberate and thoughtful interventions (Hornsey & Hogg, 2000). Leader development programs should include explicit discussion of social identities, coupled with knowledge about how to leverage social identity theory to create high-performing, diverse work teams without the threat of destructive behaviors used to enforce demographically rooted social dominance hierarchies.

Diversity in thought

Research on constructive team conflict, voice, and team diversity overwhelmingly supports the creation of teams and organizations made of people with diverse backgrounds, ideas, and viewpoints. However, diverse teams and organizations do have the potential for higher relationship conflict, lower cohesion, and greater turnover (Jackson & Joshi, 2011), and the benefits of diversity of thought may not be intuitive, particularly for inexperienced leaders. Explicit discussion of the power of diversity, along with frank discussions of the importance of leaders in managing diverse teams and organizations, are important parts of leader education and key to developing an emphasis on acceptance, dignity, and respect. As described in the previous section, these discussions should not be couched in a single lecture on diversity but rather in a combination of explicit discussions, repetition in other lessons, and modeling in relationships and experiences.

Culture and climate

As articulated throughout this article, we believe that creating a culture of acceptance, dignity, and respect is an essential step in preventing destructive behaviors. It should come as no surprise that we would advocate for training leaders on culture and climate—how they develop, the impact they have on individual behavior, and how leaders can work, through intentional and deliberate action over time, to change them. In our experience, too many leaders do not understand how their own actions both influence and are influenced by climate and culture. Typical leaders who are not intentional about culture simply allow a culture to develop (often in response to their actions or inactions) and then wonder about a "sudden" prevalence of destructive behaviors. Development programs must teach leaders to think about and work to influence the culture they desire—especially one that promotes acceptance, dignity, and respect, and counters destructive behaviors.

Concluding thoughts

This article is intended to be a call to action for leader developers to recognize their role in addressing issues of sexual harassment and discrimination. Through training, leaders can learn to act in ethical ways and to align organizational structures and practices in service of creating a culture of acceptance, dignity, and respect. Over time, these practices will become embedded as the accepted norms and shared values of the organization, shifting the organizational culture to be one that is intolerant of sexual harassment, racial discrimination, and other destructive behaviors.

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Cite this article: Wallace, D.M., Raver Luning, C., Rosenstein, J.E., Ledford, A., and Cyr-Roman, B. (2020). A culture of respect: Leader development and preventing destructive behavior. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* **13**, 225–229. https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2020.46

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