

COMMENTARY

Improving sexual harassment training effectiveness with climate interventions

Melissa B. Gutworth¹*  and Matt C. Howard²

¹Montclair State University and ²University of South Alabama

*Corresponding author. Email: gutworthm@montclair.edu

Medeiros and Griffith (2019), although recognizing the potential impact of training on reducing sexual harassment, suggest that training as a sole intervention may not be enough to create behavioral changes among employees. The authors suggest that transfer climate, specifically, is an important aspect to consider during training implementation. We believe that this valuable notion merits further consideration, and we provide additional recommendations for interventions that can both directly reduce sexual harassment and develop this broader climate to improve training effectiveness. These interventions can be categorized as environmental controls, administrative controls, and behavioral strategies (NIOSH, 1995; Reese, 2008).

These alternative interventions can be administered before training to improve motivation and self-efficacy as well as after training to ensure transfer of learned behaviors. They can also impact an organization's climate for sexual harassment, which is defined as, "aspects of the organizational climate having to do with tolerance of sexual harassment as well as to the presence, accessibility, and effectiveness of sexual harassment remedies" (Fitzgerald, Swan, & Fischer, 1995, p. 62). In their review, Willness, Steel, and Lee (2007) found that sexual harassment occurred only when the climate was permissive of the behaviors. When the climate is permissive, employees feel as if they cannot voice their concerns and perpetrators will face no consequences (Lim & Cortina, 2005), whereas an intolerant sexual harassment climate is related to the identification and reporting of sexual harassment (McCabe & Hardman, 2005). For each of the three discussed intervention types, we identify methods by which these initiatives can be applied before and after training to create a zero-tolerance sexual harassment climate and improve the effectiveness of training programs, in addition to directly reducing sexual harassment.

Environmental controls

Environmental controls involve physical aspects of the work environment that place constraints on various types of mistreatment, and organizations often use these measures to signal unacceptable behaviors (OSHA, 2004). Examples of environmental controls include prominent lighting, strict security measures, and separation of workers from harmful customers. The visibility of these interventions may serve as deterrents for perpetrators who may be more easily caught, which may subsequently reduce harassment.

Due to the highly visible nature of environmental controls, organizations have used these measures to signal acceptable behavior (OSHA, 2004). Environmental controls, such as employee monitoring, can promote ethical behaviors by increasing the risk of consequences (Lawrence & Robinson, 2007). Without environmental controls, employees may believe that the chances of being caught are slim, which may increase the likelihood of sexual harassment behavior continuing.

Additionally, employee monitoring is associated not only with more desirable behavior but also fairness perceptions (Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara, 2011). Although some attempts to control behavior can result in distrust and even more deviance (e.g., Sims, 2010), monitoring was found to both reduce undesirable behavior and increase performance due to equity perceptions. That is, employees were more likely to believe that punishments were fair and based on objective observations. It is likely, therefore, that environmental controls are effective in reducing sexual harassment by ensuring that safety threats are caught, as well as creating a climate in which sexual harassment is not tolerated and monitoring systems are perceived as fair. This climate can provide a more supportive environment for training and employees may be more attentive during training when they know that the organization values employee well-being.

Administrative controls

In addition to environmental changes, organizations can implement administrative controls. Administrative controls embed prevention methods into organizational policies and documents (NIOSH 1995; Reese, 2008). Specifically, many organizations have guidelines that protect employees from discrimination, violence, and other forms of mistreatment. Reviews of sexual harassment antecedents have found that the organization's response to sexual harassment is important and visible through the *presence, dissemination, and enforcement* of sexual harassment policies (Gruber, 1998; Tenbrunsel, Rees, & Diekmann, 2019).

To create a zero-tolerance climate, policies should be written in simple language, clearly describe prohibited conduct, identify the complaint process, and ensure that immediate action will be taken (EEOC, 2016). However, the presence of a policy is not enough to communicate climate. Studies analyzing the efficacy of policies in reducing sexual harassment are scarce, and scholars have called for further investigation (Hunt, Davidson, Fielden, & Hoel, 2010). Although most scholars agree that policies are necessary and, legally, organizations are required to prevent sexual harassment, policies may not be as effective as intended—most likely due to the way that they are disseminated or enforced (Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2006).

Having a sexual harassment policy simply inserted into an employee handbook may reduce its effectiveness. Formal policies are more effective if they are widely disseminated (Thomas, 2004). In an investigation into sexual harassment policies of universities, only 11% of students were knowledgeable of the university's policies (Cantor et al., 2015). Policies that are not widely disseminated may contribute to a more tolerant sexual harassment climate as employees perceive that the organization does not support or enforce the policy.

Yet, policies that are present and widely disseminated will still be ineffective in creating a zero-tolerance climate unless they are enforced. Grievance procedures for handling complaints may initiate conflict if the process is not handled with care (Fox & Stallworth, 2009). Employees may perceive that complaint procedures are hostile, lack confidentiality, or are risky in that they lead to isolation or pushback (Vijayasiri, 2008). The formal, public approach that organizations sometimes use to investigate sexual harassment may discourage reporting. To mitigate some of these concerns, employers should not only take immediate and appropriate action but also ensure that employees' confidentiality will be protected whenever possible (EEOC, 2016).

Together, strong administrative controls, such as policies that are clear, widely disseminated, and enforced consistently and confidentially, can contribute to a zero-tolerance sexual harassment climate. These controls can be explained and reinforced before and after training to increase the likelihood of reducing sexual harassment. Specifically, administrative controls can be used before a training program to communicate the importance of the training as well as after training to strictly enforce grievance procedures and avenues for reporting.

Behavioral strategies

Finally, behavioral strategies are direct actions to reduce undesirable behavior such as training and the availability of counseling and resources for victims (NIOSH, 1995; Reese, 2008). Behavioral strategies may be instituted before incidents occur, such as conflict management training, or after, such as victim counseling. Both types of behavioral strategies can help employees learn about how to address current harassment and prevent future incidents.

Conflict management training, a behavioral strategy, can support the effectiveness of sexual harassment training. This training may be specifically useful for increasing managers' ability to demonstrate empathy and active listening when encountering complaints or hostile situations (Harlos, 2001). If managers are perceived as approachable and receptive to sexual harassment complaints, employees may be more likely to report incidents and believe that cases will be addressed appropriately. Likewise, managers with better empathy skills may have higher self-efficacy about their ability to learn from sexual harassment trainings.

Another behavioral strategy is the availability of supportive resources, which are provided after sexual harassment incidents to mitigate the effects. Crisis intervention programs, one-on-one counseling, and support groups may all reduce the number and effects of assaults. Organizations can also implement postincident monitoring programs to prevent retaliation toward the incident reporter (Fitzgerald & Cortina, 2017). The availability of these resources can contribute to a climate in which employees feel that claims are appropriately addressed.

These behavioral strategies can aid in training effectiveness. Before sexual harassment training, companies can provide conflict management training. Managers and employees can use newfound skills such as empathy and active listening when approaching sexual harassment prevention, which may increase their training self-efficacy before the program. By increasing awareness of resources such as postincident counseling, the organization also demonstrates their dedication to a zero-tolerance sexual harassment climate.

A note on evaluating intervention effectiveness—a methodological aside

In addition to focusing on how industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology can improve sexual harassment training, Medeiros and Griffith (2019) describe the importance of evaluating training and specifically highlight the need for long-term, multiwave assessment. The authors suspect that organizations may not be reporting their findings if they find no improvement in sexual harassment rates. Without this data, it is unclear whether sexual harassment interventions are effective.

We add that organizations may find little or no initial improvement in rates due to the awareness created by training, and that a zero-tolerance climate can actually result in increased incident reporting. Research finds that employees are less likely to report sexual harassment when they perceive their work environment as tolerant of the behavior (Hulin, Fitzgerald, & Drasgow, 1996). Training and a zero-tolerance climate, however, may have the opposite effect and actually enable employees to feel more comfortable with identifying and reporting incidents.

This effect has been seen in industries that have disclosed their incident rates. The Department of Education found that sex offenses at universities increased from 3,264 in 2009 to 6,016 in 2013 but indicated that the increase was likely a result of improved enforcement and awareness (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Similarly, the U.S. Army experienced an increase in sexual assault reports from 2014 to 2017, which they believed was due to confidence in the organization's ability to reduce incidents (Esper, 2017). Organizations that evaluate their interventions may discover similar trends, and these trends may be signs of an improved climate. Without the expectation of this effect, however, interventions may be prematurely ruled as ineffective. Therefore, organizations and researchers should note this possibility before discontinuing sexual harassment interventions.

Conclusion

Although training is necessary, I-O psychology can also better support training effectiveness through interventions that create a zero-tolerance climate for sexual harassment. By implementing a combination of environmental controls, administrative controls, and behavioral strategies, organizations can more effectively reduce sexual harassment. Additionally, when measuring training effectiveness, organizations should be aware that higher incident rates may initially appear, as identification and reporting of sexual harassment incidents are improved.

Author ORCID.  Melissa B. Gutworth 0000-0003-4515-5105

References

- Cantor, D., Fisher, B., Chibnall, S., Townsend, R., Lee, H., Bruce, C., & Thomas, G. (2015). *Report on the AAU campus climate survey on sexual assault and sexual misconduct*. Washington, DC: Association of American Universities. Retrieved from <https://www.aau.edu/key-issues/aau-climate-survey-sexual-assault-and-sexual-misconduct-2015>
- Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). (2016). Select task force on the study of harassment in the workplace. Retrieved from http://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/task_force/harassment/report.cfm
- Esper, M. T. (2017). *Fiscal year 2017 sexual assault report [Memorandum]*. Washington, DC: Department of the Army. Retrieved from http://sapr.mil/public/docs/reports/FY17_Annual/Enclosure_1_Department_of_the_Army.pdf
- Fitzgerald, L. F., & Cortina, L. M. (2017). Sexual harassment in work organizations: A view from the twenty-first century. In J. W. White and C. Travis (Eds.), *Handbook on the psychology of women* (pp. 215–234). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Fitzgerald, L. F., Swan, S., & Fischer, K. (1995). Why didn't she just report him? The psychological and legal implications of women's responses to sexual harassment. *Journal of Social Issues*, *51*, 117–138.
- Fox, S., & Stallworth, L. E. (2009). Building a framework for two internal organizational approaches to resolving and preventing workplace bullying: Alternative dispute resolution and training. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, *61*, 220–241.
- Gruber, J. E. (1998). The impact of male work environments and organizational policies on women's experiences of sexual harassment. *Gender & Society*, *12*, 301–320.
- Harlos, K. P. (2001). When organizational voice systems fail: More on the deaf-ear syndrome and frustration effects. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, *37*, 324–342.
- Hulin, C. L., Fitzgerald, L. F., & Drasgow, F. (1996). Organizational influences on sexual harassment. In M. Stockdale (Ed.), *Sexual harassment in the workplace* (Vol. 5, pp. 127–150). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hunt, C. M., Davidson, M. J., Fielden, S. L., & Hoel, H. (2010). Reviewing sexual harassment in the workplace—an intervention model. *Personnel Review*, *39*, 655–673.
- Lawrence, T. B., & Robinson, S. L. (2007). Ain't misbehavin': Workplace deviance as organizational resistance. *Journal of Management*, *33*, 378–394.
- Lim, S., & Cortina, L. M. (2005). Interpersonal mistreatment in the workplace: The interface and impact of general incivility and sexual harassment. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *90*, 483–496.
- McCabe, M. P., & Hardman, L. (2005). Attitudes and perceptions of workers to sexual harassment. *Journal of Social Psychology*, *145*, 719–740.
- Medeiros, K., & Griffith, J. (2019). #Ustoo: How I-O psychologists can extend the conversation on sexual harassment and sexual assault through workplace training. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice*, *12*(1), 1–19.
- National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). (1995). *Preventing homicide in the workplace: Workers in certain industries and occupations are at increased risk of homicide*. Publication no. 93–109. Atlanta, GA: National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, CDC.
- Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). (2004). *Guidelines for preventing workplace violence for health care and social service workers*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor.
- Olson-Buchanan, J. B., & Boswell, W. R. (2006). Blurring boundaries: Correlates of integration and segmentation between work and nonwork. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *68*, 432–445.
- Reese, C. D. (2008). *Industrial safety and health for people-oriented services*. Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press.
- Sims, R. L. (2010). A study of deviance as a retaliatory response to organizational power. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *92*, 553–563.
- Tenbrunsel, A. E., Rees, M. R., & Diekmann, K. A. (2019). Sexual harassment in academia: Ethical climates and bounded ethicality. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *70*, 245–270.

- Thomas, A. M.** (2004). Politics, policies and practice: assessing the impact of sexual harassment policies in UK universities. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, **25**, 143–160.
- United States Department of Education.** (2015, April 28). *U.S. Senate Correspondence on Sexual Violence*. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/correspondence/congress/20150428-t9-sexual-violence-college-campuses.pdf>
- Vijayasiri, G.** (2008). Reporting sexual harassment: The importance of organizational culture and trust. *Gender Issues*, **25**, 43–61.
- Willness, C. R., Steel, P., & Lee, K.** (2007). A meta-analysis of the antecedents and consequences of workplace sexual harassment. *Personnel Psychology*, **60**, 127–162.
- Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara, P.** (2011). Predicting nonlinear effects of monitoring and punishment on employee deviance: The role of procedural justice. *European Management Journal*, **29**, 272–282.

Cite this article: Gutworth M.B. and Howard M.C. (2019). Improving sexual harassment training effectiveness with climate interventions. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* **12**, 68–72. <https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2019.11>