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COMMENTARY

Evidence-based recommendations for improved design of sexual harassment training

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An early point in Medeiros and Griffith's (2019) focal article is that efforts to prevent sexual harassment through careful training design will fail if not carefully designed and effectively executed. We more fully address *why* traditional approaches to training often fail and why, in the case of sexual harassment, typical approaches are unlikely to yield different results. Just as a researcher considers the appropriateness of the match between a research question and the research design, we should also consider the appropriateness of the match between a training topic area and the training design.

Although we know very little from direct empirical evidence about how to design and implement training on sexual harassment (see Quick & McFayden, 2017), we suggest several design considerations based on broader bodies of research to improve the efficacy of workplace training for sexual harassment and sexual assault prevention: (1) specific consideration of psychological safety; (2) improved post-training design to maximize retention, practice, and ultimate transfer of knowledge; (3) improved assessment utilization; and (4) strategic selection of target populations.

Designing for psychological safety

Sexual harassment is a potentially sensitive topic and can elicit a range of emotions, especially for those who have been victims, witnesses, confidants, or perpetrators. In new NPR-Ipsos polls (Ipsos, 2018), there appear to be deep divides on sexual harassment issues such as whether or not the victim (or the perpetrator) should be given the benefit of the doubt until proven otherwise, as well as other issues such as whether #metoo has gone "too far," with endorsements varying by gender, partisanship, and age. As such, a given group of employees embarking on a workplace training on sexual harassment is likely to experience a higher degree of disagreement on basic issues, including the very definition of sexual harassment, than they might on typical training topics. Because of this, psychological safety and space for differing individual experiences within the learning environment are critical to ensuring the effectiveness of such training. Training of the trainer on psychological safety, small group size, and confidentiality provisions are all means of ensuring conditions of psychological safety within a traditional training format. Coaching, either alone or as a supplement to workshop training, offers an alternate approach. Coaching involves partnering with a coachee in a thought-provoking and creative process with the goal of maximizing the coachee's personal and professional potential. In coaching, the coach deliberately crafts a psychologically safe and confidential relationship, similar to therapy, where individual beliefs, attitudes, histories, and vulnerabilities can be uncovered. Coaches are required to maintain the strictest levels of confidentiality except under specific circumstances as required by law. In addition, coaching is highly individualized and, as a supplement to sexual harassment training, could allow individuals to adopt and explore different perspectives at their own pace and readiness. It

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allows for private discussion of one's experience as a victim, a witness or bystander of an incident, a confidant, or a perpetrator (intentional or unintentional). Such discussion is not feasible in a traditional training setting. Coaching also allows for the exploration of emotionally driven decisions related to this issue, such as men's reluctance to mentor women due to fear of accusation (Ubelacker, 2018).

Improving post-training design

A single training event is unlikely to change behavior, for sexual harassment or otherwise. As pointed out by Medeiros and Griffith (2019), part of the problem in current training approaches is that knowledge is not retained over time. They call out the need for follow-up, refresher sessions, and low-risk practice opportunities. In any training program we are battling the forgetting curve, which demonstrates the steep rate of forgetting material after a mere matter of days if not hours (Murre & Dros, 2015). Evidence-based design principles can be applied to combat the forgetting curve and thereby increase efficacy of sexual harassment interventions. Indeed, some trainings achieve learning transfer (Salas, Tannenbaum, Kraiger, & Smith-Jentsch, 2012), and we know from the education literature that only deep learning will translate into an impact on broader systems of belief and behavior.

First, Wickelgren's (1981) associative network model of memory suggests that deep learning would achieve strong, neuroplastic connections across brain regions to facilitate generalized rather than specific learning. To achieve deep learning, training should allow for *retrieval practice*, as it results in 50% greater learning outcomes and can lead to far more learning than a re-studying event at a later time (Roediger & Karpicke, 2006). Part of retrieval practice can be in the form of recitation, which strengthens synaptic connections (Schwartz, Son, Kornell, & Finn, 2011). This could be achieved by working with a coach or mentor with the intention of creating structure for retrieval practice.

Second, Medeiros and Griffith (2019) suggest employees develop, analyze, and discuss their own cases or use roleplay to practice the codes taught. Indeed, in-context learning, distributed practice, and active processing are essential for learning transfer (Schwartz et al., 2011; Tessmer & Richey, 1997). The *context* of learning includes the factors in which knowledge and performance are embedded, such as the location where the work occurs, the culture of the environment in which one works, and the social and mental-emotional states of the individual. The more a training can take these factors into account, the more likely success. *Distributed practice* is learning that is spread out across a learning period rather than massed all at once. Distributed practice looks like a series of short engagements with the material over time versus one (or more) longer intensive engagements, and research shows that shorter, more frequent interactions with material can result in more efficient behavioral learning than longer interactions (Baddeley & Longman, 1978). *Active processing* includes elaboration on concepts that requires the learner to engage in behaviors of expanding on information or applying the information to varied concepts or scenarios. It also includes integrating new information into an existing knowledge base. This is a cornerstone of deep learning. One time training events without space for practice and active processing will miss the mark on retention over time. Again, we suggest here that ongoing learning opportunities, such as adding a long tail to trainings through methods such as ongoing coaching post-event, can offer the space, time, and opportunities for practice to help learning stick.

A socially supportive post-training climate is one final ingredient for continued learning and sustained change. Research demonstrates that social support is a determinant of transfer of training (Tonhauser & Buker, 2016). Sharing goals with one's coach, or with others, can also help provide accountability, feedback, and positive reinforcement—all of which enhance commitment. Adequate preparation of supervisors and colleagues to provide support during the learning

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and behavior change process is critical, as is ensuring that each individual has a supportive other during their learning process, such as a dedicated coach.

Improving assessment utilization

Pre-training assessment of key factors that influence training success, including readiness for change, self-efficacy, perceived utility, motivation, and awareness, is critical, as is post-training assessment of long term retention and behavior change (something suggested by Medeiros & Griffith, 2019). How can we use the information gleaned to improve the actual effectiveness of a sexual harassment intervention? We offer two recommendations.

First, use pre-training assessment to set up employees for success. For example, readiness for learning and change varies among individuals (Avolio & Hannah, 2008), and with sexual harassment training, this variability may be wide. Assessment prior to training could help evaluate readiness, and those a with low readiness could be given coaching prior to training, or the information could be used to tailor training to meet them where they are.

Second, use post-training assessment to continue to provide the necessary resources and support, as well as course-correction or relearning opportunities when needed. When multiwave longitudinal assessments are deployed, we recommend not just using this data for program evaluation purposes, but for ongoing, dynamic intervention. For example, organizational-level assessments could be used to guide the cadence of learning opportunities provided, while individual-level assessments could be used for real-time guidance of post-training coaching.

Strategic selection of target populations

We recommend targeting sexual harassment training and coaching to three populations: leaders, women, and a critical threshold. First, leaders in organizations set the psychological safety climate, which determines the degree to which employees feel safe reporting harassment; sadly, we know from Medeiros and Griffith (2019) that 76% of victims do not report incidents. In addition, leaders often have authoritative power to identify changes for policy or procedure implementation.

Second, individuals at higher risk for victimization may be a strategic target population for training. Such individuals can benefit from training in the identification of harassment, and in overcoming their fears of reporting-associated stigma to initiate a process of broader change. Reporting of incidents is a critical catalyst for change, as evidenced by the #metoo movement. We know that women are more frequent targets of sexual harassment, although the gender gap may be getting smaller (Quick & McFayden, 2017). That said, we firmly believe the burden to combat sexual harassment should not rest on training the victim but should involve preventative and educational training for both genders, as both genders are victims, bystanders, and perpetrators.

To that end, researchers have suggested that population targeting for sexual harassment training must be holistic, live, and customized (see Quick & McFayden, 2017). This may often present pragmatic constraints, especially for high-touch interventions, such as coaching, that are difficult to scale. Fortunately, technological advances have led to more cost-effective options for scalable coaching. To the extent that an organization needs to prioritize whom to coach or train, however, we point to evidence that suggests widespread change can be achieved rapidly once 25% of the population advocated for the change (Centola, Becker, Brackbill, & Baronchelli, 2018). Organizations may therefore consider how they can design trainings to incorporate at least this tipping point percentage of their organization within those programs or coaching cohorts in order to reestablish social norms.

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Conclusion

In sum, leveraging behavioral science for an improved state of sexual harassment training is a timely issue. As industrial and organizational psychologists, we have an opportunity to help organizations design and implement learning interventions that better reflect modern learning principles, leverage assessments effectively, and reflect strategic implementation. Coaching may be a particularly fruitful intervention or component given its unique ability to create psychological safety, support distributed practice, and capitalize on the lessons of experience. Research should be conducted to evaluate both the impact of training design and the efficacy of coaching as a tool in sexual harassment prevention.

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