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COMMENTARY

Together we stand: Ally training for discrimination and harassment reduction

Danielle M. Gardner* and Jo M. Alanis

Michigan State University
*Corresponding author. Email: gardn333@msu.edu

Both identity-based discrimination and harassment continue to pervade workplaces (Colella et al., 2017), creating a barrier for organizations attempting to foster an inclusive environment for their workers who are a part of stigmatized or marginalized groups. One potential organizational-level response to such behaviors is training, although empirical evaluations suggest that such efforts may be associated with limited effectiveness (Bezrukova et al., 2012). Accordingly, in their focal article, Hayes et al. (2020) present a number of broad topics and research questions aimed to highlight areas in which sexual harassment and racial discrimination training may become more effectual. In this commentary, we put forth ally training as an alternative approach that may address a number of the identified topics and suggest that such training efforts may prove a potentially promising avenue toward the development of a more inclusive organization.

What is ally training?

The term ally was originally grounded within the lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGBT+) community, describing individuals of majority-group sexual identities who strive to combat the oppression faced by those of stigmatized sexual identities through support and advocacy (Washington & Evans, 1991). However, the term has more recently come to refer to identities beyond sexuality, in that any individual of a majority-group, nonstigmatized identity engaging in supportive behaviors on behalf of individuals of marginalized populations may be considered an ally (e.g., male allies advocating for women, Cheng et al., 2019; White allies advocating for racial minorities, Patton & Bondi, 2015). Empirical examinations of the effectiveness of allies suggests that indeed, through the acknowledgment of one's privilege and the concerted application of that advantage, allies can effectively confront prejudice (Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Martinez et al., 2017) and alter prejudiced attitudes relative to target individuals (Stangor et al., 2001).

How then can allies be developed in organizations? One mechanism is through the implementation of ally training programs: those designed to promote awareness and support of stigmatized and marginalized groups through the development of "allies" aimed at welcoming and advocating for such individuals (Worthen, 2011). With respect to content and learning objectives, Woodford et al. (2014) found that the substance of ally training programs (within the context of LGBT-focused trainings) generally clustered around four themes: (a) understanding LGBT concepts and bias awareness, (b) understanding LGBT issues and recognition of heterosexual privilege, (c) understanding how to support LGBT individuals, and (d) understanding how to advocate for a more inclusive organization. Such topics appear to mirror the stages of heterosexual ally identity development put forth by Washington and Evans (1991): awareness, knowledge/education, skills, and action. Accordingly, ally trainings may differ from traditional sexual harassment or diversity trainings to the extent that they are

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focused on developing an *identity* within trainees, as compared to simply providing behavioral "do's" and "don'ts."

Why might ally training be particularly effective?

Ally training programs may be effective in reducing identity-based discrimination and harassment within organizations for many of the reasons identified within the focal article (Hayes et al., 2020). For example, the authors identified trainee motivation as a factor relevant to organizational training commitment (Topic 1), acknowledging that perceptions of training framing may impact motivation and engagement (Kath & Magley, 2014). As noted, to the extent that sexual harassment or diversity-relevant trainings are perceived as organizationally motivated by liability minimization, trainees may not be particularly energized, as the training may be perceived as an end in itself from the organization's perspective rather than an opportunity for true skill development. In contrast, ally trainings may differ as they are explicitly focused on personal development and trainee identity growth, potentially increasing personal accountability given the less obvious ties to organizational outcomes.

When one identifies as an ally and that role becomes a foundational part of who they are, there is likely to be a greater commitment to the expectations that are instrumental in fostering an inclusive environment. Therefore, identity formation serves not only as a gateway toward the enactment of the organization's desired attitudes and behaviors, but also for the sustainability of such practices that are ultimately contingent on the individual actors involved. Diversity and sexual harassment trainings may promote positive changes in attitude or behavior in the short term, but one of the barriers to enhancing the effectiveness of such trainings is the lack of opportunity to practice and further develop those skills on the job. Because such skills are reflective of the ally identity, which is characterized by the unwavering support and advocacy for members of stigmatized groups, they are expected to be enacted more consistently and through a habit-like manner, further speaking to the potential enduring effects of ally training.

A key consideration of the effectiveness of any training program is the manner in which the content is delivered (Topic 5). One potential concern is the extent to which the training frames trainees as a part of the problem rather than part of the potential solution. In other words, careful framing of the content is crucial in communicating the correct message. Because ally trainings are framed toward personal development and growth, the message conveyed is one of support rather than criticism. This characteristic is likely to decrease the defensive affect that would be present otherwise, further leading to an increase in effectiveness and potential for greater buy in from trainees.

Further, ally trainings may be effective given their inherent relationship with bystander intervention (Topic 3). Indeed, both allies and bystanders would be concerned with and trained in skills related to acknowledging and intervening in circumstances of witnessed identity-based mistreatment; however, ally training importantly differs from bystander intervention in that it focuses beyond reactionary practices. Although confronting prejudice when witnessed is a focal aspect of allyship (e.g., Martinez et al., 2017), allies are also concerned with fostering an inclusive environment in which identity-based mistreatment is prevented in the first place. Such proactive, rather than reactive, behaviors can include the provision of developmental opportunities for target individuals, amplification of target voice, mentoring behaviors, and the development and support of relevant workplace policies (Cheng et al., 2019). Accordingly, ally training may indeed be more effective than simple bystander intervention to the extent that it can more holistically address issues relevant to the presence and enactment of discrimination and harassment.

Last, it should be acknowledged that even the most empirically sound methods can yield little progress if not endorsed or supported by key stakeholders and organizational leaders (Blume et al., 2010). Initiatives or efforts directed toward reducing harassment and discrimination may signal the existence of internal issues an organization is attempting to address, potentially jeopardizing

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its public image and reputation. As ally training promotes self-development as a way to advocate for other people, perceptions around the training itself are likely to be viewed in more of a positive light. Further, organizations today are being held to high standards of ethical and transparent behavior, often studied through the lens of corporate social responsibility (Topic 8). By encouraging workers to adopt the role of an ally, wherein that identity should continue to pervade even outside of the organizational context, the organization may then signal its values and commitment to social justice and responsible behavior. Thus, ally training offers a potential approach toward connecting the framework of corporate social responsibility with efforts to reduce discrimination and harassment.

Limitations of allies and ally training

While we argue that ally training is associated with a number of benefits, there are also limitations worthy of acknowledgment. First, allies may cause harm despite having positive intentions (Cheng et al., 2019). Some members of stigmatized or marginalized groups may prefer to avoid situations that have the potential to elicit any kind of negative response or that may direct greater attention around their identity; allies may then defeat their own purpose if they are not thoughtful in their actions. Additionally, allies themselves may feel a sense of vulnerability if their motives are questioned by others either in the majority or minority groups (Ji, 2007) or if their identification as an ally could be viewed as signaling membership within a stigmatized group themselves (Sabat et al., 2013). Finally, individuals must be willing to accept the role of an ally and the resulting responsibilities. Some people may not readily embrace the idea of allyship, and therefore training may be of limited effectiveness for the population needing it the most (e.g., those holding the greatest biases or those enacting discriminatory behaviors within the workplace). Acknowledging these concerns, we suggest that ally trainings inform their content accordingly; that is, ally trainings should intentionally differentiate actions associated with effective versus ineffective support, provide allies with strategies to cope with any potential concerns associated with their public ally identity, and emphasize the need for ubiquitous support and advocacy.

Conclusion

Organizations seeking to create or maintain an inclusive environment for their employees by minimizing harassment and discrimination may find ally training a promising direction. We have proposed that such trainings can assist in these efforts through its encouraging rather than critical framing, its relationship with both bystander intervention and corporate social responsibility, and its development of enduring identity-based skills and competencies directed toward support and advocacy for members of stigmatized or marginalized groups. Though this discussion is directed toward ally trainings for the workplace, it is likely that the efforts invested will translate into other contexts and inform further social justice initiatives.

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