

The Importance of Cultural Change

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For more information, visit cola.unh.edu/prevention-innovations-research-center.

When faced with addressing sexual harassment, the first instinct many leaders have is to find a “quick fix.” This contributes to the growth of a cottage industry offering opportunities for executives to “check the box” with online training programs, glossy pamphlets or statements that pledge not to harass. These approaches are not effective, and they are not based on research and best practice. In fact, many current workplace education and prevention approaches reinforce victim-blaming myths and are a waste of valuable organizational resources.

Reducing sexual harassment in the workplace involves developing strategies that stop violence before it occurs and creating organizational cultures that support safe and respectful environments. A framework for creating organizational cultural change that supports respect and safety, and does not tolerate sexual harassment and assault, can be thought of as a pie with three equal slices.

Resources and Support

One-third of the pie is “resources and supports for victims.” Organizations need clear policies that define sexual harassment and provide clear instructions for what employees should do if they are a victim of sexual harassment or assault or witness a colleague being harassed.

Organizations must offer trauma-informed resources and supports, both within the organization and the community, for employees who disclose an incident of sexual harassment or assault. Employees must know where and how they can report these incidents and understand that the organization has a fair and confidential process for disclosure that will not place them in jeopardy of losing their position. Employees must be trained on how to support a colleague who discloses and understand that they have a responsibility to assist. These employees also need to know they will not face retribution for helping a colleague.

Due Process

Another third of the pie is due process for the accused. All employees must know that their organization has a zero-tolerance policy for sexual harassment and assault. The consequences of these behaviors must be clearly identified and enforced equitably for all employees regardless of their organizational rank.

As part of this enforcement, organizations must have protocols and procedures for reviewing and investigating sexual harassment complaints. Those accused need to be treated fairly and provided with clear guidance on the investigation.

Prevention

Historically, most of the attention has been paid to the first two slices of the pie. However, the last slice of the pie, comprehensive organizational prevention, has the potential to have the most lasting and impactful effect on supporting a safe and respectful workplace. Organizational leaders must acknowledge that creating this type of environment requires a comprehensive strategy that engages all employees. Every employee needs to understand the organization’s sexual harassment policies and reporting structures, how to recognize sexual harassment and support someone who has been harassed, as well as how to safely intervene to stop harmful behavior.

Additionally, leaders and employees need to learn skills to create safe and respectful work environments. This can include learning how to compliment another person without belittling or sexualizing/objectifying them, creating opportunities where employees with less status or power can contribute to organizational policies and practices, and building a sense of community. Everyone needs to take responsibility for supporting a safe and respectful workplace culture.

Policies should be shared during employee orientation, and regularly reiterated through evidence-based prevention strategies, including interactive in-person trainings, social marketing campaigns and conversations about creating safe and respectful workplace environments.

These prevention efforts must provide employees with the knowledge they need to identify sexual harassment in the workplace and to effectively respond. Evidence-based bystander intervention training can help employees learn and practice ways to directly and subtly intervene when they observe harassment. Further, effective bystander training teaches participants how they can support victims after the harassment or the assault.

A common theme in so many victim disclosures and reports is self-blame. A colleague who witnesses this behavior could say to the victim, “I can’t believe this just happened, it is not your fault, let’s go and speak with human resources.” Research on victim disclosure and response illustrates that this type of empathic response has positive implications for how victims move forward. Our research assessing the effectiveness of campus sexual assault prevention underscores the importance of target audience insight and the program delivery mechanism. This type of thoughtful, comprehensive and strategic prevention will help organizations ensure that the resources they spend will make important cultural change. ■



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