



When HR Gets It Wrong: Training that Doesn't Work

By Dana Wilkie | Jul 19, 2017

This is the third in a four-part series of articles—"When HR Gets It Wrong"—that explores why some training to prevent workplace misconduct, inequity and other problems doesn't work, and what types of training may be better able to help.

When Glen Kraemer recently conducted bullying prevention training for a large corporation, the organization's CEO showed up, sat in the front row, asked pointed questions, and even admitted publicly that—while not intentional—he may have once behaved in a bullying manner.

The CEO sent a letter to employees after the training discussing its importance and encouraging those who hadn't attended to take make-up sessions. He followed up with supervisors four months later to ensure they had put the session's principles into practice.

"This leader's actions resonated throughout this organization," said Kraemer, a partner with Hirschfeld Kraemer in Santa Monica, Calif. "Supervisors and employees made special note of the leader's support for creating a corporate culture that valued respect."

This doesn't happen at all companies. When senior leaders avoid training on harassment, discrimination and diversity—by claiming they're too busy for such sessions or attending truncated versions of the training or delegating the training to an underling—then rank-and-file employees don't take misconduct or unfairness seriously, either.

If companies want training to be effective, then the sessions not only need to be visibly endorsed by leaders, but they also must be in-person, high-quality, relevant for employees and conducted frequently, said experts interviewed for this article.

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A Liability Focus Doesn't Resonate

The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) recently hired Fran Sepler to create an anti-harassment training program to be used across the federal government. The commission sought this new training after an EEOC task force concluded in a June 2016 report (www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-news/pages/eec-harassment-task-force.aspx) that—30 years after the U.S. Supreme Court held that workplace harassment was an actionable form of discrimination prohibited by federal law—"we have come a far way since that day, but sadly and too often still have far to go."

The report pointed out that in most cases, anti-harassment training at companies "is not working."

Why not?

"Some of us learned earlier than others that merely telling people what not to do not only doesn't work, it turns them off," said Sepler, president of Minneapolis-based Sepler & Associates, which provides services and advice to organizations that want to create a respectful workplace. "Researchers have established that training ... programs [that] use outlandish or extreme examples which insult [the intelligence of] the people in the training programs ... polarize and sometimes trivialize the real problems between real people."

Training that focuses strictly on avoiding liability can come across as too abstract, boring and not relevant to workers' experiences, said Alisa Shorago, an attorney and owner of San Diego-based Shorago Training Services, which provides anti-harassment training.

"Trainers can't just talk about the law in an abstract fashion [because] participants have no idea how to actually use that information," she said.

Leaders Set the Tone

Kraemer has trained thousands of people at hundreds of organizations. Sometimes senior leaders don't show up for the training, show up for only part of it or have someone take the training in their place.

"Even the most engaged leaders have a lot on their plates, and they can have short attention spans," Kraemer said. "A trainer needs to come up with a plan that appeals to the leader."

That takes research, Kraemer said. Hire a reputable and entertaining trainer, he suggested—someone who understands the content that will grab the executive team and the method of delivery that will keep them listening. HR should explain how it will be more interesting and helpful for C-suite members to attend in person than to sit at a computer and train remotely for two hours.

Sometimes it helps to appeal to a leader's ego, he said. Have a top executive introduce the training and demonstrate by her actions its importance. "It will be noticed by everyone," Kraemer said. "Moreover, catering to the understandably large egos of powerful executives by explaining their essential role in the training will make it a lot easier to get their commitment."

HR should also make the business case for why the training is important and explain the optics of the C-suite not attending. "Leaders in these organizations are often shielded from reality by complicit HR people," Sepler said. "These organizations may thrive in the short term, or even the midterm, but the reputational costs [when misconduct happens] are usually high."

Years ago, the law firm that Karen Kruse worked at presented a sexual harassment skit to a large HR audience. Those in the audience served as "jurors" for a mock trial after the skit.

"The audience's energy and engagement was nothing short of wonderful," said Kruse, an employment law attorney in Seattle. "For me, it was a great illustration of how acting or role-playing can be a highly effective training tool. And it was a lot of fun for those of us who played the roles in our skit. It turned out to be an internal team-building exercise."

Fifteen years ago, Sepler said, she began something new, shifting the focus of training from complying with the law to how employees' actions affected one another. At the start of each of her anti-harassment training sessions, she asked employees what respect looked like.

"The transformation was incredible," she said. "This was practical, real-world stuff, and they could not get enough of it. When we built the training model so that respect was the [focus], people began paying better attention. Almost everyone wants to be treated with fairness, respect and dignity."

Sometimes, concrete examples may include court cases, said Patty Wise, a partner with Toledo, Ohio-based Niehaus Wise & Kalas Ltd. and co-chair of the Society for Human Resource Management's Labor Relations Special Expertise Panel.

"That is often the first time that some leaders begin to understand the problem, and certainly the tangible costs of the problem."

Instructors must also demand that participants behave appropriately during in-person training, Katz said.

"I've had many people say ... that they've been in the room taking training with people yukking it up and making fun of the hypothetical examples, with eye-rolling and sexist jokes," she said.

"So people actually experienced the training itself to be sexually harassing."

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Trainers should never aim to change people's minds about what is and isn't appropriate behavior but should instead try to change their behavior.

For instance, there may be some men at a company who are threatened by women advancing in the workplace, said Ramona Paetzold, a management professor at Texas A&M University's Mays Business School.

"They may be angry about it," she said. "They are using their power to discourage women and 'keep them in their place.' "

Said Sepler: "If a man thinks it's completely fine to tell a woman she looks sexy in a dress, training is not designed to make him believe that this is wrong. Training is designed to tell him that those comments will not be accepted in this workplace. He can continue to think it's fine, but it won't be tolerated. It's not training to change your mind. It's training to keep your job."

The 'Loved One' Litmus Test

Employees should understand that if they witness misconduct—even if they're not the victims of it—they have a responsibility to report it.

"I often use the 'loved one' litmus test," Kraemer said. "Have a supervisor consider whether what they are observing is something that they would be uncomfortable with if their daughter or son was being subjected to it. That can be a very powerful lesson."

Ongoing Training

Finally, training can't be just a one-time or annual event.

"A single training event alone is unlikely to change institutional behavior," Paskoff said. "As an example, many of the organizations in STEM [science, technology, engineering and math] and in oil production recognize the importance of safety. In such organizations, safety is continuously talked about and training is delivered regularly and reinforced."

Said Shorago: "People who have been in the workplace for a long time are another great reason for why regular training is important. Norms for what is and is not appropriate workplace behavior are constantly evolving—and evolve relatively rapidly. I've been providing harassment prevention training since 2007; even in the last decade, I've seen significant changes as to what is acceptable behavior in the workplace."

In addition to workforce-wide training, managers at all levels—from managers to the C-suite—should receive extra coaching about their responsibilities in preventing workplace misconduct, Kruse said.

"This separate training or coaching will vary with the level of management involved, and it likely needs to be most intensive for lower-level supervisors and those new to management," she said. "Employers should consider [scheduling] this additional training immediately after the workforce-wide training. They should be able to frankly raise questions and concerns and perhaps role-play how to respond" to situations.

Tomorrow: The final (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/hr-topics/employee-relations/Pages/HR-Gets-It-Wrong-4-.aspx) in a four-part series of articles—"When HR Gets It Wrong"—explores how creating a "culture of civility" is key to preventing workplace misconduct, inequity and other problems. Read the first (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/hr-topics/employee-relations/Pages/HR-Gets-it-Wrong-1.aspx) and second ([/ResourcesAndTools/hr-topics/employee-relations/Pages/HR-Gets-it-Wrong-2-.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/hr-topics/employee-relations/Pages/HR-Gets-it-Wrong-2-.aspx)) installments.

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