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Vaccines, Racial Justice, #MeToo: Workplace Bystander Training Is More Important Than Ever

| How it works

 By [Ashley Virtue](#), NCRC

The past 18 months have brought us a global pandemic, a contentious presidential election, racial justice protests, anger about vaccine mandates and most recently, another powerful man guilty of sexual harassment. The Delta variant of Covid-19 has forced companies to change daily operations yet again, and further complicated office reopening plans for hybrid and remote workplaces. How can any HR director navigate this seeming minefield, and help employees [work better together as they return to the office](#), navigate [tough conversations](#), handle awkward situations and prevent harassment?

The hard truth is, most anti-harassment trainings in the workplace [don't work](#). However, **bystander communication training is different**. It plants the seeds of cultural change that empowers employees to confront difficult situations, preventing discrimination and harassment before it even starts.

The [National Conflict Resolution Center](#), where I have worked for over 15 years, recently worked with Toyota North America to design training for their employees, called [The Bystander Challenge](#). Here's how it works, and why we believe that bystander communication training is more important than ever.

Why Bystander Communication, and Why Now?

Workplace harassment definitely preceded #MeToo, but the movement highlighted just how difficult it is to prevent it without major culture change. In June 2016, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) published a report following a year-long multidisciplinary study of workplace harassment. In one example, the [report](#) found that “anywhere from 25 percent to 85 percent of women report having experienced sexual harassment in the workplace.” Even more alarming, 75 percent of sexual harassment goes unreported, due to feelings of guilt or embarrassment, fears of retaliation, or a belief that nothing will be done.



The impact of harassment in the workplace is well known, and includes increased litigation costs, a demoralized workforce, and lost productivity. And while sexual harassment is most often talked about, hostility based on a person's race, religion or sexual orientation can have similarly debilitating impacts. In today's ever-changing, polarized environment, mismanagement of this kind of harassment can be particularly problematic.

In the same report that highlighted how often harassment goes unreported, the EEOC recommended employers consider offering bystander intervention training as one strategy to address this issue. Based on work done on college campuses to tackle sexual assault and to address bullying at schools, bystander intervention training empowers people on the sidelines to intercede when issues occur.

How Does Bystander Communication Work?

Bystander communication identifies and addresses microaggressions—the everyday slights and insults that can turn into harassing behavior over time—and teaches employees how to spot red flags and [what to do when they see them](#). Over the years, workplace bystanders have shed light on egregious wrongs, and brought justice to survivors of harassment, most recently in the case of former New York governor [Andrew Cuomo](#).

Unfortunately, employees are often afraid or hesitant to get involved when they see something “off” happening. Based on our experience leading these workshops, here are some of the most common fears workers might have about speaking up or intervening when they witness microaggression:

1. Fear of retaliation, such as being fired or passed over for promotion;
2. Fear of hurting your relationship with your colleagues, and feeling like it's “not your place” to get involved;
3. Fear of jumping to conclusions, or getting involved with a situation that turned out to be harmless; and
4. Fear of harm to your reputation at work, or becoming known as “overly PC” or “no fun.”

Bystander communication training teaches strategies to understand and overcome these fears. Participants also learn the [“4 D's” of bystander](#) communication. Two of them are options “in the moment,” and two of them are options for after the incident has occurred:

In the Moment

1. **Distract.** Do something to interrupt the interaction between the person responsible and their target.
2. **Direct.** Make a brief, clear statement to stop the behavior. For example: “You know Josh, usually I like your jokes but that one kind of crossed a line for me.”



After the Incident

3. Delegate. If you don't feel like you are in a position to address the situation with one of the parties involved, go to someone who can take appropriate steps. Report what you saw to an authority figure with formal power, such as an HR manager—or a colleague with informal power, who simply knows the people involved better than you do.

4. Dialogue. This might seem like the most challenging task for bystanders, but it is by far the most effective, in terms of long-term results. Listen respectfully to the other person while calmly stating what you saw occur. Be curious about their behavior and ask open-ended questions, such as “What do you feel like the appropriate thing to say would have been in that situation?” Your goal should be to hear and understand what the other person is saying. That is very different from pretending to listen while you are actually thinking about and rehearsing your next

response (which is human nature and often what happens in difficult conversations).

Bystander communication training makes cautious bystanders into confident upstanders, and makes a [respectful workplace](#) a shared responsibility. Bystanders are encouraged to speak up, understanding it's their responsibility to do so, and employees play an integral role, rather than HR leading a top-down approach.

Toyota Tackles the Bystander Challenge

Like most large companies, Toyota had previously held mandatory anti-harassment training for its nearly 36,000 North American employees. Despite those efforts, leadership wanted to ensure that there weren't unreported incidents, as the EEOC report suggested.

This prompted Toyota to approach the National Conflict Resolution Center, and our two organizations collaborated to create a bystander communication

program that became [The Bystander Challenge](#). Bystander communication training, by nature, uses more realistic circumstances and addresses all employees, not just potential victims of harassment. Toyota executives found that it appealed to employees' individualized values and was successful at encouraging employees to stand up to potentially questionable behavior that didn't align with one of Toyota's key values – Respect for People. They also understood the value of their HR leaders collaborating with an outside organization on this type of training, to bring the best possible expertise – internal and external – to the project.

There is also a moral benefit: bringing in outside experts shows employees you are truly invested in changing workplace culture. Outside organizations can also serve as a neutral party and create a safe space for employees to talk about issues. Oftentimes, employees feel nervous admitting that they have witnessed microaggressions or “red flag” behavior in the past and have done nothing. With the right facilitators, these employees quickly learn that wanting to avoid confrontation is a natural, human response, and we have to acknowledge that. When employees feel safe, it's easier to focus on things that motivate bystanders to take action and move employees from seeing themselves as passive bystanders to active upstanders.

From Bystander to Upstander

Many workplaces are now navigating returning to work “in person,” and the truth is that none of us are coming back to the office as the same person we were pre-pandemic. We view things differently now. This means there's a greater likelihood of strong reactions to inappropriate comments and jokes between your employees. Workforces need to be equipped to handle these situations when they occur, so they can be dealt with in respectful and forward-thinking ways. Importantly, while it's vital for employees to know what to do when someone clearly crosses a line, the real key to protecting everyone in your workplace is to stop that line from being crossed in the first place.

Right now, it's common practice for companies to train employees on how to identify and combat workplace harassment. But, as the EEOC study reported, and as

the #MeToo movement, summer 2020's racial justice protests and the ongoing pandemic divisions have proven, this isn't enough. What's needed is a cultural change that empowers employees to confront difficult situations to prevent discrimination and harassment, especially during this divided, tense time. At the end of the day, employers can set themselves up for success by empowering employees to fortify a workplace with a culture of respect and civility by equipping their employees with the tools to have these conversations through effective bystander communication training.

Learn more about bystander communication training [here](#).



Ashley Virtue has served as Director of External Relations of the [National Conflict Resolution Center \(NCRC\)](#) since 2005. She is frequently called upon as a thought leader on effective communications strategies by national media and hosts the organization's weekly “[Mindset Monday](#)” series on YouTube providing practical and actionable tips for some of the most challenging issues of our time. She also recently hosted a virtual dialogue, “[Boss Ladies: A Frank Conversation about Women's Rise to Power and the Struggle to Keep It.](#)”



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