

CUSTOM CONTENT

Getting Real in the Workplace —

Successful Anti-Harassment Training Starts with Culture

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Perhaps nothing is met with more eyeroll than “mandatory training” at a workplace, regardless of how important or how much it may be needed.

At Toyota Motor North America (TMNA), we took pride in our ongoing efforts to demonstrate the company’s core value of Respect for People. But, we also considered the realities of the changing workforce and how issues outside the workplace may affect life within. Like most large companies, we had mandatory anti-harassment training for our nearly 36,000 employees, but despite those efforts, we wondered if there were unreported incidents? Did training fatigue set in turning it into a “check-the-box” effort instead of a real learning experience? And, of course, the big question, was there anything more we as a company could do?

Enter the National Conflict Resolution Center (NCRC). Working together with the NCRC, we helped them develop The Bystander Challenge. It’s a training solution that is engaging, relatable and practical, and does more than combat workplace harassment — it helps change corporate culture.

The collaboration began in early 2018, at the height of the #MeToo sexual harassment movement. In 2018, sexual harassment complaints rose 13.6 percent over the previous year, according to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), the agency responsible for enforcing federal civil rights laws against workplace discrimination.

But the problem preceded #MeToo. In June 2016, the EEOC published a report following a year-long multi-disciplinary study of workplace harassment. 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.

That last point captured our attention. We had a robust policy prohibiting harassment and retaliation, multiple avenues for reporting, a reputation for investigating promptly and taking action when warranted, and regular harassment prevention training. Harassment complaints were rare, but were there any unreported incidents? And what else could we do?

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.

The importance of bystander intervention became even more apparent in the summer of 2020, as social and racial tragedies sparked a national consciousness. As employees became passionate about being a part of the solution for society,



the search for a bystander intervention training module led to NCRC and The Bystander Challenge.

NCRC’s solution used more realistic circumstances and addressed all employees, not just potential victims of harassment, appealing to their individualized values and encouraging everyone to nip questionable conduct in the bud, long before it morphed into reportable harassment.

Authenticity was also important. So, video footage was shot at Toyota locations, with actors dressed in the same manner as employees. Training scenarios were realistic and relatable, and the involvement of HR collaborators helped ensure credibility. After nearly two years in the making, the Bystander Challenge was introduced to salaried employees last October, and a phased rollout to Toyota’s nine U.S. manufacturing facilities will begin this year.

How the Bystander Challenge Works

So much can occur before a situation turns into actual harassment or discrimination. And while it’s important to know what to do when someone clearly crosses a line, the real key to protecting employees is to stop that line from being crossed in the first place.

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. Often, employees are afraid or hesitant to get involved, concerned about retaliation, hurt relationships or a damaged reputation. The Bystander Challenge teaches strategies to understand and overcome these fears. And while many remarks or actions aren’t intentionally hurtful and may not seem overtly discriminatory, they can take a psychological toll.

Is the Bystander Challenge Right for Your Organization?

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 polarized environment, mismanagement of this kind of harassment can be particularly problematic.

It’s common practice to train employees on how to identify and combat workplace harassment. But, as the EEOC study reported and the #MeToo movement

proved, this isn’t enough. Companies need to do more than offer policies, procedures and training to ensure compliance.

What’s needed is cultural change that empowers employees to confront difficult situations to prevent discrimination and harassment. This is particularly important as social and racial tragedies continue to unfold. 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.

The Bystander Challenge offers a different take on the traditional HR model that companies couldn’t be held responsible unless a victim came forward to report a hostile work environment claim. This training makes a respectful workplace a shared responsibility. Bystanders are encouraged to speak up, understanding it’s “their responsibility” to do so. With employees playing an integral role, companies will now truly have an opportunity to achieve lasting cultural change. ■



THE BYSTANDER CHALLENGE

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Questions? Contact Ashley Virtue

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