



IDEAS MADE TO MATTER | ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Fixing a toxic work culture: How to encourage active bystanders

 by Tom Relihan | May 20, 2019

Why It Matters

Active bystander intervention has been found to reduce harassment and violence in colleges and the military. It's time for the corporate world to take notice.

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Last year, thousands of employees of Google [staged a mass walkout](#) to protest the tech giant's approach to sexual harassment and misconduct, accusing the company of protecting, with silence and multimillion-dollar settlements, the executives accused of such behavior.

Among the picket signs: "What do I do at Google? I work hard every day so the company can afford \$90,000,000 payouts to execs who sexually harass my co-workers." It was a textbook and very public example of the wrong sort of response from management to a toxic work culture.

The values and norms that your organization purports to hold are useless if they're left on the shelf like a dusty book, said Daena Giardella, a senior lecturer at MIT Sloan who specializes in organizational culture, implicit bias, and improvisational leadership. You have to practice and reinforce your values if you want to eliminate toxic behavior in the workplace — which can include not just sexual harassment, but also bullying, put-downs, bias, and angry outbursts.

Reinforcing values and norms

If you let problematic behaviors slide, Giardella noted, and they become rampant and tolerated, they threaten to supplant the positive norms you're trying to instate or maintain.



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Daena Giardella | Senior Lecturer

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“Whatever those norms of behavior are, they need to be made very clear, and that needs to filter down through the whole organization,” she said. “If you see someone being shamed or belittled, or an inappropriate joke of a sexual nature happens, and nobody speaks up during or after that moment, even if it’s just a flash of a moment, you are literally building a new norm.”

Giardella said awareness and action need to come from both the top of the organization — the C-suite and management — and from ground-level workers.

“The upper-level executives need to listen to employees who are in the best position to tell upper management what’s actually going on. And all members of the organization at every level need to think of themselves as leaders who speak up when they witness or experience inappropriate behaviors,” she said. “Management needs to do more than just pay lip service when they hear about these issues — they need to consistently foster a culture of respect, openness, and psychological safety.”

Bystanders as first-line responders

Over the past few decades, diversity training has become more and more commonplace in professional organizations. It typically comes in the form of a mandatory training program, often involving educational videos. But, Giardella said, research has shown that those sessions have been less effective in reducing workplace harassment and fixing problematic cultures than had been hoped.

“What may be needed is something more like hands-on bystander intervention trainings, where employees learn and practice what to say, as opposed to only watching a video,” Giardella said.

Having colleagues take on the role of active bystander for each other can be one of the most potent antidotes to a toxic work culture. Active bystanders are people who witness an inappropriate situation unfolding and take steps to intervene and stop the behavior. [Research has shown](#) that bystander intervention methods have been effective in the military, on college campuses, and in other settings.

Giardella said strategies to teach for intervening include:

- Interrupt the behavior. This could be as simple as realizing inappropriate behavior is occurring and finding a reason to pull the target aside or pivoting the conversation to a different topic.
- Affirm and support the target. When someone demeans a colleague or puts their work down, a bystander can interject and highlight the team member’s positive contributions.
- Use humor to call out behavior. If a bystander notices a colleague engaging in sexually suggestive comments toward another person, they could interject with a humorous response that makes the point clearly, Giardella said, something along the lines of, “Hey, when did this conference room turn into a pick-up bar.” She added: “However, we have to be careful when using humor in these circumstances because we do not want to inadvertently convey that we found the inappropriate behavior funny or acceptable. The humor must carry an unambiguous message of disapproval.”

- De-escalate and calm the aggressor if other interventions fail. If the person exhibiting inappropriate behavior becomes defensive in response to an intervention method, bystanders should be trained to table the conversation and attempt to calm the person down. It could be an appeal to their principles, pointing out the positive aspects of their character and questioning how they could both hold those values and conduct themselves in such an inappropriate fashion. “It can help a person feel like they’re not being completely negated as a human being, so they can come down off that limb of defensiveness a bit,” Giardella said.
- Let bystanders know there is a clear limit. As a leader, make it clear that workplace harassment and other toxic behaviors are not tolerated, and be prepared to act against the perpetrators if the bystander’s intervention fails to solve the problem.

Choosing interventions carefully

In training your workforce, encourage would-be active bystanders to decide which approach to intervention is most suited to their own personality, Giardella recommended. “Let’s say they’re someone who is conflict-averse and uncomfortable intervening in the moment. Well, there are some great interventions for after the fact,” she said.

The most important bystander intervention after a situation is over to offer support and validation to the person who experienced the inappropriate comment or behavior. (“Are you ok? I saw what happened. That was inappropriate.”) Bystanders could also offer to accompany and support the targeted employee as they make their report, or to talk to their harasser or assist them in confronting that person, if that’s what they want to do.

Preventing retaliation

Of all the toxic behaviors, Giardella pointed to cultures where retaliation is commonplace as among the most serious. According to the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, only one in four sexual harassment cases get reported, Giardella noted, and of those reported cases, [one study](#) showed three-quarters of the reporting employees experienced some form of retaliation. That’s a major deterrent that prevents others from reporting and allows the harassment to continue unchecked.

“Historically, many policies around sexual harassment, for example, have been designed to protect the organization, not the people,” Giardella said. “We need something that protects all of the stakeholders and directly addresses the fear of retaliation.”

The best step to take? Adopt a zero-tolerance policy to retaliation in any form.

Reputation management

Of course, empowering your workforce to feel safe about bringing issues up won’t mean anything if nothing is done to fix those situations. Failing to do so can be a major drain on productivity, and it can have big consequences for your business’s reputation as a whole, too.

Think it can’t happen to you? Just search “workplace harassment” and “Google” online.