

COMMENTARY

1 **Changing the narrative on harassment and**
2 **discrimination training: Building an organizational**
3 **culture with healthy professional boundaries**

4 Sara Jansen Perry 

AQ1

5 Baylor University

AQ2

6 Corresponding author. Email: sara_perry@baylor.edu

7 For the past few years, I have worked with organizations to conduct training aimed at preventing
8 the harassment and discrimination behaviors described by the focal article by Hayes et al. (2020).
9 I share here an alternative approach I have taken in these efforts, applying expertise from
10 industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology to build positive and healthy organizational
11 culture. I have taken this approach, because, knowing that employees typically perceive harass-
12 ment and discrimination training as an empty form of liability protection that does not really
13 influence their day-to-day life (Bezrukova et al., 2016; Hayes et al., 2020; Medeiros & Griffith,
14 2019), I was not eager to participate in this stigmatized professional pursuit, even when invited
15 by notable organizations (Antecol & Cobb-Clark, 2003). My primary role is a scholar in an
16 academic position, so I only accepted this challenge when I was able to apply my research
17 and teaching expertise to shift the narrative, allowing for more positive experiences for trainers
18 and trainees alike. In short, I suggest that when shared norms, purpose, and values of an
19 organization (i.e., culture) become the focus of harassment and discrimination training, leaders
20 can lay the foundation for significant and lasting change in relation to these critical issues while
21 also minimizing the apathy, cynicism, and even deviance that otherwise result (Ambrose et al.,
22 2002; Bezrukova et al., 2016; Steele & Vandello, 2019).

23 More employees suffer from a hostile work environment (i.e., ongoing, relatively minor
24 harassment or discrimination events, often embedded in a toxic organizational culture) than from
25 the more extreme events typically depicted in the news. A hostile work environment often
26 manifests because leaders or employees simply lack awareness of the definition and need for
27 *professional boundaries*. By changing the training narrative to focus on professional boundaries
28 as the foundation of a healthy organizational culture, organizations can overcome shortcomings of
29 past training efforts (Colquitt et al., 2000) and prevent offensive incidents from multiplying into a
30 more serious situation. Professional boundaries delineate appropriate versus inappropriate
31 behaviors at work and among organizational stakeholders. The goal is to help people discern,
32 replace, and/or appropriately address explicit or potentially illegal behaviors, behaviors that
33 may be misinterpreted or unappreciated by some members of an organization, and any other
34 unprofessional behaviors that may simply be inappropriate, all of which contribute to an
35 unhealthy organizational culture. The need for this type of training may be particularly critical
36 in organizations dealing with certain sectors of the workforce (e.g., younger workers, high-
37 turnover industries; Antecol & Cobb-Clark, 2003). New or nontraditional leaders may also need

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38 education about how professional boundaries can protect them from doing anything that can be
39 mischaracterized in their higher-level roles. But all members of the workforce can benefit from
40 education of the importance of professional boundaries as part of a larger conversation on healthy
41 organizational culture (Preusser et al., 2011).

42 The following sections outline this culture-based approach, delineating the framework I have
43 used with positive results in organizations. I discuss theoretically informed best practices in two
44 categories as components of training design: content and logistics. I close with a brief discussion of
45 training evaluation and implications for research and teaching.

46 Training content

47 The culture-based messaging I propose can instill excitement about the organization and what it
48 can represent for all stakeholders, empowering participants to individually and collectively make
49 an impact in fostering a great workplace. Essentially this approach is “substituting negative
50 attitudes with positive ones,” as suggested by Hayes et al. (2020, p. 2) by replacing a negative,
51 avoidance, compliance-focused narrative with a positive, approach, culture-focused narrative
52 (Coats et al., 1996). The following outline of content is provided only as a guideline and should
53 be customized to each organization’s unique culture, mission, workforce, and training needs.

54 Definitions and examples of healthy cultures with appropriate professional boundaries are a
55 good starting point rather than starting with negative and/or extreme examples of harassment
56 or discrimination. Examples of minor violations of professional boundaries can be helpful
57 (and entertaining) conversation starters, including the audience in dialogue about where certain
58 behaviors fit on the appropriateness spectrum, particularly for those that are ambiguous. Once
59 rapport has been established, more serious examples of violations can be shared in conjunction
60 with other typical elements of harassment or discrimination training (e.g., definitions, relevant
61 headlines to help the audience see the broader implications, a discussion about who is harmed,
62 and organizational policies and procedures for violations and reporting).

63 Next, participants need to be trained to be “good bystanders” to emphasize everyone’s critical
64 role in building a healthy organizational culture (Lee et al., 2019). Replacing “what *not* to do” with
65 “what *to* do” can be helpful and motivational (e.g., giving actual scripts about what to say and do in
66 various situations, who to involve, and in what order to involve key stakeholders). Conflict
67 management principles and procedures are important to share here as well. For example, if a
68 bystander witnesses a professional boundary violation, he or she should first privately ask the
69 alleged victim if he or she was bothered by it. If not, then perhaps no further action is needed.
70 But if the victim did feel violated, the bystander can become an advocate for that colleague as he or
71 she follows the proper resolution process, including talking with the accused perpetrator and
72 reporting to HR at the appropriate time. Similarly, this training should provide tools for effectively
73 speaking with someone who has crossed a professional boundary. Participants should also be
74 given actions they can take if they do not feel confident in approaching the accused perpetrator.
75 In sum, this portion of the training should combine education on standard HR policies with
76 professional skills training to empower all members to foster a healthy culture with professional
77 boundaries throughout the organization, without instilling fear, distrust, or oversensitivity.

78 The final major component of this training is building awareness across individual, cultural,
79 and role differences. This can be invaluable to helping participants better understand themselves
80 and others, equipping them to function more effectively in daily work life (Lacerenza et al., 2017).
81 Participants should engage in guided small group discussions about differences that may lead
82 people to define boundaries differently, which help participants understand ways to speak and
83 behave with coworkers that will uphold professional boundaries (for example, how to give
84 compliments to colleagues by focusing on tasks, rather than on personal appearance; Kluger &
85 DeNisi, 1996). These discussions reinforce how professional boundaries can help all coexist in
86 a healthy organizational culture that respects and protects each member, even while allowing each

87 organization to maintain its unique approach to building connections among employees and each
88 employee to maintain his/her unique identity. These discussions can also help participants see
89 what happens when differing perspectives and preferences collide within an organization that does
90 not have healthy professional boundaries.

91 In closing the training, the facilitator should reinforce the important role that professional
92 boundaries play to protect all within a healthy organizational culture. It is paramount that these
93 messages are customized to the organization's existing culture and workforce, embracing the
94 unique ways the organization's leaders want people to interact but also establishing clear guidance
95 about how professional boundaries can improve even the most unique culture. It is also important
96 to ensure that participants do not leave the training feeling like they are being watched for
97 every misstep but instead that they are active participants in fostering this healthy culture.
98 Group discussion and participant sharing about lessons learned and what professional boundaries
99 now mean to them after going through this training experience are good ways to end on a positive
100 and motivational note.

101 **Logistical training principles**

102 Carefully planned in-person training with interactions among organizational members is critical
103 for this alternative approach. Particularly for difficult topics like harassment and discrimination,
104 an in-person experience will enhance satisfaction and application by participants far more than
105 independent online training with little to no discussion or interaction (Antecol & Cobb-Clark,
106 2003; Lacerenza et al., 2017). This format also communicates that leaders have prioritized these
107 topics as ongoing conversations, meant to foster a healthy workplace that promotes well-being,
108 engagement, and impact within a strong community of employees (i.e., the definition of healthy
109 organizational culture); it is not an annual compliance checklist. A logistical question often raised
110 is whether this training should be mandatory or voluntary (Bezrukova et al., 2016), but this
111 distinction becomes less relevant with this alternative approach. Instead, this becomes an oppor-
112 tunity for team members to sharpen their professional skills while building strong teams.

113 Multiple methods should be used for delivery to maximize retention and application
114 (Bezrukova et al., 2016). Lecture interspersed with video clips and role plays will stimulate
115 discussion about key principles. These methods can teach skills for recognizing, replacing, and
116 addressing behavior that is counter to the desired organizational culture. Small group discussion
117 can also help participants verbally process and connect with others while applying concepts to
118 their shared work experience. These discussions can foster shared appreciation of professional
119 boundaries as the basis of a strong organizational culture. This format is particularly useful
120 when building awareness of differences across individuals, as people can connect even in their
121 differences, improving their understanding and connection with each other.

122 Polling can be integrated throughout the training to enhance richness of interaction and
123 discussion. All answers can be collected and shared anonymously, either electronically
124 (e.g., PollEverywhere™) or with sticky notes or index cards, giving participants an opportunity
125 to react to others' input. Good polling topics early in the session include the current culture and
126 boundaries, as well as initial perceptions about the meaning of professional boundaries. Polling
127 can also be used when teaching discrimination and harassment concepts to quiz participants
128 about what behaviors would be (in)appropriate, (il)legal, or perhaps questionable in certain
129 situations. When behaviors in gray areas are mentioned, ensuing discussion can be lively as
130 the group refines its definition of professional boundaries within its unique organizational context.
131 Closing the session with a final poll question about "what professional boundaries mean to me and
132 my organization's culture" can be a powerful testament to the learning and awareness that has
133 developed through the session.

134 A final logistical consideration is timing. This type of training should be delivered as part of
135 employee onboarding and should be revisited in team-building and periodic organization-wide

136 events designed to enhance the culture while energizing employees and leaders for working
 137 toward the organizational mission. The language of *professional boundaries* should be reinforced
 138 in daily organizational life, including in leader and HR communications, and with explicit
 139 refreshers built into the employee lifecycle to continue to motivate all members to embrace these
 140 principles as they uphold a healthy organizational culture. When critical incidents have occurred,
 141 this type of training can also foster reconciliation and buy in for moving forward.

142 Training evaluation and benefits

143 In using this alternative approach to training, I consistently see appreciation by participants for
 144 the safety offered by an organizational culture with healthy professional boundaries, with
 145 improved understanding of the protection offered by the end of the training. Participants also
 146 express gratitude for open discussion on these topics. Increased awareness and confidence about
 147 how to help promote a healthy organizational culture is another often-vocalized benefit, which
 148 goes beyond civility training or simple teambuilding (Walsh & Magley, 2019). The language of
 149 professional boundaries should be further integrated throughout the organizational culture via
 150 employee engagement surveys and annual performance reviews, which allow for evaluation
 151 of long-term effectiveness of this approach. Objective data can also be collected through HR
 152 reporting metrics, comparing frequency and content of complaints before and after the training.
 153 Insufficient integration throughout the organization can result in increased complaints after
 154 3 to 6 months, particularly if turnover is high and onboarding does not include discussion of these
 155 topics.

156 Research and teaching implications

157 Empirical research is needed to test the effects of this culture-based training approach, both
 158 through organizations collecting the data just described and through experimental studies to
 159 measure attitudes and intentions when using this method versus the avoidance-based,
 160 compliance-focused method of traditional training. I echo Hayes et al. (2020) in calling for more
 161 training of HR and I-O psychology students in this approach, leveraging their expertise on
 162 organizational culture, empowerment, diversity and inclusion, teambuilding, and conflict
 163 resolution. Shifting the narrative to a positive, engaging, and ongoing experience will benefit
 164 organizations by building healthy, strong cultures that can protect and empower employees to
 165 collectively work toward their mission and thrive in the process.

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