The Power of Bystander Intervention

Activate Your Workforce to Prevent Harassment and Discrimination
Have colleagues ever said that they were not surprised that a particular employee has been accused of acting inappropriately? Many, if not most, harassment, bias, and other problematic incidents are preventable when warning signs are noticed and addressed “upstream” of the event. The technical term for this is “bystander intervention” and in a healthy workplace, employees will intervene in appropriate, safe, and respectful ways to maintain a positive culture.

Several forces are pointing toward the need for dramatically new approaches to address harassment and discrimination in the workplace: the #MeToo movement, the EEOC Task Force Report on the Study of Harassment in the Workplace, and empirical research from campuses and companies, to name only a few. Bystander intervention training – in addition to organizational and structural changes, providing resources for employees who have experienced harm, and accountability for those who commit harm – has been identified as one of the most promising practices for preventing harassment and discrimination at work.

But what is bystander intervention? And how do we teach it effectively in our workplaces?

One of the outstanding insights of bystander research has been confirmation that most people want to intervene but don’t – and that they often regret not doing so. Thus, the popular phrase “say something if you see something” may be much easier said than done. Indeed, the presence of “open secrets” in a workplace is a testament to how difficult it can be for employees to speak up about known concerns.

Employees are frequently witnesses to concerning behavior, sometimes more often than leaders are. But teaching employees how to speak up and intervene effectively and, equally importantly, making it safe and comfortable for them to do so, requires much more than a slogan. Organizations must: identify the barriers that prevent concerned employees from acting on their concerns; teach their workforce to notice problematic situations; and identify appropriate skills that can be used in a variety of situations in which there may be personality, cultural and situational differences, and power differentials. These three steps can be simply summarized as: Awareness, Attitudes and Action.

Extensive research has identified five stages that an individual must go through in order to shift from being a “passive” to an “active bystander”. These can be summarized as: 1) noticing the event, 2) interpreting it as a problem, 3) feeling responsible for doing something, 4) having a plan or plans of action, and 5) intervening.

1. Notice the event.
2. Interpret it as a problem.
3. Feel responsible for doing something.
4. Have a plan or plans of action.
5. Intervene.
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While there are many employees who will notice a bias or harassing event (or a warning sign) and interpret it as a problem, many others will not readily identify it as a concern, particularly when it involves less extreme conduct such as everyday sexism or microaggressions based on race, age, disability, or other characteristics.

This lack of awareness may be due to the employee not having experienced this harmful behavior themselves or may be the result of unconscious prejudices that have been learned from family, friends, co-workers, and the media. Our first step must therefore be to Build Awareness and include education about all forms of bias, discrimination, microaggressions, and harassment so that the event is “noticed.”

But even when something is noticed and seen as problematic, many do not act despite their discomfort with the situation. Why? What are the barriers to intervention? Why wouldn’t an employee do something when they are concerned and want to take action?

There may be a number of reasons. An employee might think that another person will respond – this is what is called “diffusion of responsibility.” An employee may observe others not acting, leading the employee to assume that the situation is not serious (social inhibition). It is also natural to be concerned about possibly embarrassing others or ourselves, or about potential retaliation (fear of negative outcomes). Or we might not realize that others are also bothered (misperceiving the norm). All of these concerns can inhibit individuals from intervening, which in turn creates an environment that allows the problematic behavior to continue.

The term “bystander effect” refers to the well-documented phenomenon in which fewer people act when there are more people involved. Applying the above-mentioned barriers, one can see how social concerns (i.e., fear about negative reactions and feelings of others) would be intensified when there are more individuals involved or witnessing an incident. Thus having more employees present or witnessing an act of bias or harassment paradoxically results in less action. The good news is that in a workplace where individuals know that others are concerned and would respect them for taking action, the bystander effect can be reversed.

Imagine a situation in which someone makes a problematic remark during a meeting. You are offended, but upon looking around, it seems that your colleagues are not bothered. Research confirms that if you could read people’s thoughts you would probably see that most people are concerned but that most people think that others are not concerned. The technical term for this is “pluralistic ignorance” – thinking you are in the minority when you are actually in the majority. The flip side of this phenomenon is that in many situations the person making the offensive remark may think that others agree with it – i.e., they may think that they represent the majority when in fact they are a minority – which is called “false consensus.” Pluralistic ignorance and false consensus interact to create a dangerous workplace dynamic that enables concerning behavior to continue and fosters a culture of silence.

A critical element of ending harassment and discrimination in the workplace is helping employees “break the silence” and foster a culture of active intervention. In addition to the possibility of taking action in the moment, it is important that employees talk to each other (or to others in the organization who can help) about their concerns regarding their colleagues’ behavior and how to respond.

Research has demonstrated that most people underestimate how bothered others are by the same witnessed behavior and, further, do not realize that their colleagues will usually respect and appreciate them if they step in. Thus, a first step is to help employees Build Awareness of self and others to create a culture of caring – a culture in which employees will know that in most cases their coworkers are similarly concerned by harassing or biased behavior and will support them acting to address it.

A second step is to Encourage Supportive Attitudes in your employees. Data collection tools, such as climate surveys or employee surveys included in anti-harassment training sessions, are available to help you measure employee attitudes, documenting these true but often hidden norms of employee concern and willingness to intervene. Organizations can then use workplace trainings and other communications campaigns to disseminate this attitudinal information and correct the “misperception” that others are not as concerned as oneself. This approach, called the “social norms approach,” can be used to document and disseminate that a majority of your employees are concerned about unprofessional, discriminatory, and harassing behavior. This information can be used to: encourage the healthy majority of employees to speak up and take action when they see warning signs of harm, foster a culture of respect for those who do intervene, and dissuade would-be offenders from acting in harmful ways.

A third step in the process, in addition to raising awareness and measuring employee attitudes about intervention, is to Equip the Entire Workforce with Tools to Take Action.

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Because individuals and situations are variable, there is no “correct” way for an employee to step in. Rather, organizations must have an ongoing program in place to teach employees effective methods of intervention that are personally comfortable for them in a variety of situations, either on the spot or later. This can include: a more direct form of confrontation (i.e., imposing authority or expressing feelings); more indirect forms of intervention that distract or disrupt a situation (such as not participating, changing the subject, or offering a positive comment about someone to counter a negative remark); involving someone else who can help address the situation (i.e., delegate); or offering after-the-fact support someone who has been the target of a concerning remark or behavior (e.g., “Are you okay?” or “That bothered me...Did that bother you?”). For simplicity, these skills, which can be summarized as the 4 Ds of bystander intervention (Direct Approach, Distract/Disrupt, Delegate, and Delay, respectively), cannot be taught in a one-time training but must be integrated into an ongoing effort.

An ongoing culture change strategy can include a variety of components:

- Delivering training across your entire workforce that contains “notice the event” exercises as well as skill-building exercises that allow employees to practice intervention techniques in various scenarios
- Reinforcing bystander messaging and positive social norms through organizational communications and/or employee-facing media campaigns
- Setting the right “tone from the top” by leaders modeling healthy behaviors and providing positive reinforcement and resources
- Measuring problems and progress through employee surveys and assessments, which in turn can be used to modify training, communications, and other future efforts.

No one, including organizational leaders, are in a position to observe all employee behaviors at all times in all locations. But effective leaders can delegate in this area by teaching employees to be aware of and alert to warning signs and empowering them to act on their concerns.

The goal is to enlist the healthy majority of employees who want to be allies in the effort to build a respectful culture and to provide them with the information and tools they need to feel comfortable in an active bystander role. To achieve this type of comfort, employees must feel prepared and confident in their ability to take action, but also supported by their organization and personally gratified that they did something. The vast majority of your workforce wants to help cultivate a positive environment and understands that it is in their self-interest to do so. In this way, they can be our most powerful allies in harassment prevention – but only if we take the necessary steps to engage and empower their efforts.

Developing a comprehensive prevention strategy to address challenging workplace issues is not an easy process, and it requires an engaged workforce community. If companies truly want to stop “upstream” behaviors before they lead to harassment—they need a robust, coordinated training plan that has the commitment of the entire organization. The stakes are just too high for anything less.
About the Authors

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EVERFI's workplace training packages cover a wide-range of issues, from harassment and discrimination prevention, diversity and inclusion, code of conduct, and data security. They go beyond mere compliance training to focus on prevention—creating an atmosphere of trust and respect where employees want to do better and be better for each other.

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