

A Thoughtful Approach: How to Conduct Impactful, Engaging In-Person Sexual Harassment Training

With the increased focus on Title IX compliance and the national spotlight on sexual harassment, Title IX coordinators and HR professionals at colleges and universities must find ways to help campus administrators and employees to not only understand and comply with the letter of the law, but also to embrace the spirit of the law. While training alone isn't the answer to creating a harassment-free environment, it certainly should be part of an institution's broader strategy. However, in order to make an impact, the training must be engaging, insightful, interactive and relatable — and sitting at a desk clicking through an online training module or watching a video about workplace harassment is anything but engaging. With an in-person training approach, participants can ask questions, engage one another in dialogue, and connect to the content, making the messaging more likely to stick.

In a recent CUPA-HR webinar, Rythee Jones, head of human resources at Washington Adventist University, and Estevanny Turns, head of HR and Title IX coordinator at Maryland Institute College of Art, explored the benefits of and barriers to in-person sexual harassment training and shared the approach they use on their campuses to deliver impactful in-person training.

Benefits of In-Person Training

Jones and Turns highlighted several benefits of using an in-person approach for sexual harassment prevention training on campus. Gathering employees together in one room and inviting conversation around the topics discussed allows for in-depth exploration of complex issues and issues unique to your organization. It allows for a focus on the why behind the laws, not just the dos and don'ts and rules and regulations. It allows for clarification of concepts and terminology, as well as question-and-answer time. Interactive, in-person training conducted on a regular basis helps an institution be proactive instead of reactive, and demonstrates that sexual harassment issues are important to the institution, showcasing its commitment to a harassment-free workplace.

Barriers to In-Person Training

Jones and Turns also noted several barriers to delivering in-person training, and shared some food for thought around these roadblocks:

Barrier: HR doesn't have time to deliver in-person training.

Food for Thought: Conduct a cost-benefit analysis, which might uncover that the HR team may spend more time mitigating the impact of harassment if it doesn't do a good job of prevention training.

Barrier: HR doesn't have the expertise in presenting or training in this area.

Food for Thought: Consider outsourcing, but make sure the vendor can customize its training to your institution.

Barrier: Participants are too busy to attend in-person training.

Food for Thought: Stagger training dates and times and create a predictable training cycle.

Barrier: The campus is too large or decentralized for in-person training.

Food for Thought: Consider a train-the-trainer approach.

Three Examples of Interactive In-Person Training Activities

Jones and Turns have had great success in their sexual harassment training by using several different activities and exercises designed to encourage high levels of engagement and interaction among participants. They offer the following examples, which can easily be integrated into any in-person sexual harassment training program.

World Café Approach

The World Café approach (www.theworldcafe.com) is rooted in creating a hospitable, comfortable, relaxing environment in order to encourage open and honest small-group discussion, active listening, participant-led brainstorming and the sharing of collective discoveries. Here's how Jones uses the World Café model in her training:

Four small round tables (stations) are set up in the room. Each station contains a flip chart with a cue (in this case, the cues are four different types of harassment — written, visual, verbal and physical). Participants are divided into groups of four or five individuals and each group rotates through the four stations (about five minutes at each table),

The World Café Method for Hosting Group Dialogue

The World Café methodology is a simple, effective, flexible format for hosting group dialogue. The following five components comprise the basic model:

1. **Setting.** Create a “special” environment, most often modeled after a café (ex. a room of small round tables that seat four or five people, with butcher block paper serving as a tablecloth or a flip chart and colored pens, a vase of flowers and an optional “talking stick” item on each table).
2. **Welcome and Introduction.** The host begins with a warm welcome and an introduction to the World Café process, setting the context, sharing etiquette rules and putting participants at ease.
3. **Small Group Rounds.** The process begins with the first of three or more 20-minute rounds of conversation for the small group seated around a table. At the end of 20 minutes, each member of the group moves to a different table. They may or may not choose to leave one person as the “table host” for the next round, who welcomes the next group and briefly fills them in on what happened in the previous round.
4. **Questions.** Each round is prefaced with a question crafted for the specific context and desired purpose of the gathering. The same questions can be used for more than one round, or they can be built upon each other to focus the conversation or guide its direction.
5. **Harvest.** After the small groups (and/or in between rounds), individuals are invited to share insights or other results from their conversations with the larger group.

where they brainstorm examples of what might constitute each type of harassment and write down their ideas on the flip charts. Jones serves as the facilitator and at the end of the activity, she debriefs the activity for the entire group.

SBI Feedback Model Exercise

Oftentimes, sexual harassment training does a great job of defining sexual harassment, explaining how to report it and providing resources, but, according to Jones, most training programs don’t offer strategies for empowering those who choose to do so to confront an individual who is exhibiting unwanted behavior. The Situation-Behavior-Impact (SBI) Feedback model (www.ccl.org/situation-behavior-impact) provides a framework for how to have a structured conversation around what can be a difficult or uncomfortable topic — allowing for crucial conversations to take place. The model is as follows:

- 1) Situation – describe the situation;
- 2) Behavior – describe the behavior;
- 3) Impact/Effect: describe the impact/effect on you;
- 4) Change – describe what you want the person to change;
- 5) Consequences – state consequences if the behavior continues.

Here’s an example of an SBI Feedback model exercise that can be used in in-person sexual harassment training:

Ask participants to form groups of three, and then assign an “unwanted behavior” scenario to each group. Within each group, one person acts as the individual confronting the unwanted behavior, one person acts as the individual responsible for the behavior, and one person acts as an observer (taking notes on the interaction and offering feedback at the end of the exercise). The groups then use the SBI Feedback model to engage in a three- to five-minute conversation about the unwanted behavior in their given scenario. Each of the three individuals performs each of the three roles in the exercise.

Human Continuum Activity

Turns notes that there isn’t just one form of sexual harassment, and it’s important for participants to be aware of the many types in the workplace. This activity helps participants identify different types of sexual harassment and determine their severity so that appropriate steps can be taken address the issue. Here’s how it works:

- Divide participants into small groups and have them form a line against the wall.

fresh ideas

- Each person will pick a harassment-related scenario out of an envelope.
- Participants will read the scenario and decide where it falls on the continuum of severity, and then negotiate with other participants in line to determine where each scenario falls.
- Participants will change places in line based on the increasing severity of the behaviors identified in each scenario.

After the activity, the trainer should debrief the activity and allow for discussion.

Impact on Campus

Jones and Turns both say that providing interactive, in-person sexual harassment training has had a positive impact on their campuses. Turns rolled out the training at Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) in mid-2013. She began by connecting with her allies and supporters on campus — as head of HR and Title IX — and inviting them to attend the training. “After going through the training and realizing the impact it could have on campus culture, these individuals created a buzz about it and talked it up across campus,” she says. “Soon enough, we began to see higher-level administrators and even the president in the training sessions. The president was quite impressed and directed that we make it mandatory for all of our staff.”


Turns says the training provides a platform for the MICA campus community to engage in conversations that weren't previously happening. “We're a tight-knit community, and it's common to be greeted by a coworker with a hug or even a peck on the cheek — that's our campus culture,” she says. “Through this training, we were able to talk about

the fact that a seemingly innocent, friendly hug might be considered unwelcome behavior by some individuals and that a hug can in fact be a form of sexual harassment — which actually shocked many of our employees.”

Jones says that building the sexual harassment prevention training at Washington Adventist University (which is mandatory for all staff, faculty and students) around the institution's core values, specifically the values of respect and open and considerate communication, has been key to the program's success. “As a small, faith-based institution, our employees are a tight-knit community, and it's a very family-like atmosphere,” she says. “Many of our employees and students worship together, many coworkers spend time outside of work together with their families, and like at MICA, by nature of our campus culture, many of us are huggers and touchers.”

As a result of the training, says Jones, campus community members have become more aware of the impact their seemingly benign behavior might have on another individual. “They've become more cognizant of the fact that it's not necessarily about their intent in an action, it's more about how that action makes the other person feel,” she says.

A Thoughtful Approach

While training alone will not eliminate sexual harassment in the workplace, it can play an important role in creating awareness, identifying risky behavior and opening the door for conversations around this important topic — but only if participants are fully invested, engaged and interested. With a thoughtful approach to in-person training on your campus, the odds are in your favor that the message will stick. 

To learn more, and to access some ready-to-use templates for in-person training activities, watch the CUPA-HR webinar “Delivering Engaging, Informative, Impactful Sexual Harassment Training,” available on demand at www.cupahr.org/webinars. For additional resources, check out the Title IX and Sexual Harassment Toolkit in CUPA-HR's Knowledge Center (www.cupahr.org/knowledge-center/toolkits).