

Creating Brave Spaces

Bystander Intervention Skills for Shifting Work Cultures

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PHASE I: LITERATURE REVIEW

TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE IN THE WORKPLACE: EMPOWERING AND INCENTIVIZING BYSTANDER INTERVENTION

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A Literature Review

Equity and diversity (or similar) training have become ubiquitous in modern workplaces. However, the efficacy of these training offerings – especially when carried out in isolation - is questionable. Critics often suggest that if carried out without an accompanying effort to create a broader shift in a workplace environment, the impact of such training on workplace culture can be negligible or even negative. For example, the following observation was made in the context of diversity and inclusion training:

Trainers tell us that people often respond to compulsory courses with anger and resistance—and many participants actually report more animosity toward other groups afterward (Dobbin and Kalev 2016).

However, the research discussed in this review (presented below) suggests that an effective antidote to this problem takes the form of empowering and incentivizing bystander intervention within the workplace (Powell 2011; Taket and Crisp 2017).

A bystander is defined as someone who is aware of a potentially harmful event or behaviour happening to someone else but is not initially involved in it. Bystander intervention describes a situation where such a potentially harmful event is disrupted, curtailed or responded to by the bystander. This thereby, somewhat alleviates the responsibility to defend the victim themselves.

Bystanders can be motivated by a range of factors to become involved in such a situation to disrupt/curtail/respond to it. These may include a sense of moral or legal obligation, empathy with the victim or even material incentives. However, potential bystander interveners also face barriers that may prevent them from acting. These usually include:

- lack of awareness that help is needed;
- not knowing how to help; and
- concern that intervening will result in negative consequences.

This research review addresses these challenges and suggests a range of mechanisms designed to mitigate or overcome them. However, the main conclusions are that for bystander intervention to become a competent and reliable means to combat intolerance and/or harassment, it requires a broader effort of transformative change to occur. This research review outlines seven (7) general

suggestions of best practice initiatives that may be undertaken to work toward this goal.

They are:

1. Empower the bystander
2. Encourage civility
3. Train seriously and often
4. Promote more women and people from marginalized groups
5. Encourage reporting
6. Ensure proportionality while protecting against reprisals
7. Evaluate progress

What is Transformative change?

“Transformational changes alter what we do, not just how we do what we do. They are by nature risky and uncomfortable” (Kevin 2017). In other words, transformational change implies an effective change in the culture and structures at play in the workplace.

This can take many forms, including, for example, a change in the language used by workplace leadership; alterations in HR policy designed to shift the emphasis away from protecting the company from liability toward protecting and respecting individual employees similar to the changes being ushered by *Bill C-65*; and policy shifts intended to empower and reward bystander intervention.

While training can be an important element of this process, training design and delivery must be carried out with appropriate forethought; sensitivity to both the nature of the audience and issues discussed; and conducted within a broader process of transformational change (see Powell et al. 2011 inter alia). Indeed, absent such more general factors, evidence suggests that training can reinforce harmful norms and behaviours through provoking reaction, minimizing real-world concerns, or reinforcing gender stereotypes (Taket & Crisp 2017).

However, within circumstances where workplace conditions are made to be more supportive, bystander intervention can be one of the most effective tools in preventing harassment and implementing a culture of inclusivity and mutual respect. As Schulte (2018) explains: “culture change is exactly why bystander interventions could be powerful: the strategy recognizes that, when it comes to workplace culture, everyone is responsible for creating it, every day, in every interaction.”

The role of bystanders

In most workplace contexts, there is likely to be a small number of perpetrators of abuse and/or intolerance, and a relatively large number of survivors/victims. At the same time, the majority of individuals will be bystanders. Though this simple observation might seem obvious, the implications are profound; transformational change in the workplace requires mobilizing the majority of bystanders to act in defence of victim/survivors' rights and dignity, and ensuring that the workplace systems and/or culture is not enabling bystanders to take a passive, neutral, or accepting stance towards abuse or intolerance.

A common theme in the literature reviewed (see Miller 2017; Schulte 2018; Relihan 2019; Aggarwal Brenner 2020 inter alia) is that, typically, bystander intervention can take one of three forms. These are:

- **Diffusing situations where abuse and/or intolerance is taking place.** This can take the form of becoming indirectly involved in the situation by interrupting, changing the subject, altering the environment or otherwise interrupting the perpetrator.
- **Empathizing with the victim by offering support and validation without judgement.** Such intervention generally comes after an event or an example of abuse or intolerance that has already taken place, but may help the victim feel better supported going forward.
- **Directly confronting the perpetrator.** This form of intervention tends to be the highest risk for the bystander, victim and perpetrator, and is therefore, generally considered the least appealing.

However, not all bystanders nor all environments are the same. For example, as (Cares et al. 2014) report, there may be significant differences like bystander response according to their own gender identity, noting that "women are more likely to intervene in instances of risk for sexual violence, and to provide emotional support, particularly to social network members, while men are more likely to help in emergency situations."

Further, (Taket and Crisp 2017) note that: "Statistically significant changes have been reported for participants in bystander intervention programmes" depending on factors including:

- **“knowledge** (increased knowledge about violence, including consent, prevalence, definitions);

- **attitudes** (decreased rape myth acceptance, decreased sexist attitudes, increased empathy towards rape survivors, decreased perception of peer sexist attitudes, increased responsibility to make interventions, decreased denial of violence as a problem, increased confidence to intervene, increased intention to intervene);
- **behaviour** (increased bystander interventions made, decreased perpetration of violence, decreased likelihood of perpetrating violence); or
- **outcomes** (decreased violence victimization, decreased incidence of community violence (perpetration), decreased incidence of community violence (victimization)).”

Given this degree of variability and the inevitable complexity inherent in any workplace, it is not surprising that (Taket and Crisp 2017) warn that, “the transferability of programmes established as effective in one particular context to other different contexts cannot automatically be assumed” and should be tested in practice.

Broadly speaking, challenges faced by potential bystanders boil down to three practical barriers, as outlined by Aggarwal and Brenner (Aggarwal and Brenner 2019): “(1) not recognizing that help is needed; (2) not knowing how to help; and (3) worrying that helping will result in negative consequences to self and the accused.”

The process of bystander intervention is represented visually in Latane and Darley’s five-stage model (1970, quoted in Taket and Crisp 2018).

Challenging these barriers requires time, hard work and a firm commitment to change the normative culture throughout the entire workplace. Ideally, this would take the form of creating an environment wherein episodes of abuse or intolerance are prevented rather than resolved as (Schulte 2018, 1) explains:

(at) the most fundamental level, bystander interventions could begin — long before an incident of harassment — with workers having non-threatening, informal conversations in unstressed moments about how to treat each other, how they can help each other do their jobs or make their days better, and practice giving positive feedback.

It is interesting to note that similar advice is relevant even when harmful interactions occur outside the traditional office setting, but still in the context of work. This is particularly apt in the current context of remote work and working from home structures in place as a response to the changing nature of work exacerbated by the global pandemic. In Madden and Loh’s (2018, 18) analysis of the bystander effect and its impact on instances of cyberbullying in the workplace,

the authors find that “real world theories such as the bystander effect ... still apply in the virtual world”. They make the case that broader environmental change is necessary to nip the potential for abuse in the bud:

Educating employees about the harmful effects of cyberbullying and training them to identify these negative acts will undoubtedly ameliorate bystander intervention. Management must, therefore, establish effective policies that define cyberbullying, and that communicates to employees the appropriate steps to be taken when the negative act occurs – either to themselves or others. (Madden and Loh 2018, 18)

Practically, regardless if the abuse or intolerance was witnessed in-person or in a virtual work environment, to achieve the kind of transformative change that empowers bystanders to overcome barriers aforementioned, workplaces can foster a culture that considers and supports some, if not all, the best practices identified below.

Best practices for facilitating bystander intervention

A simple overview of this guidance is offered by Miller (2017) based on various academics and analysts' findings. The following list is adapted from Miller (2017) based on further conclusions drawn from this review (Aggarwal and Brenner 2019; Mckenzie, Varley, and Barr 2018; Taket and Crisp 2017):

1. **Empower the bystander** by reassuring them that they will be heard, and that workplace leadership support their taking action when needed. Bystanders should also be training in effectively identifying situations of abuse and/or intolerance and in methods for disrupting them.
2. **Encourage civility** by setting the right tone for the workplace. This can come from leadership providing positive feedback, modeling appropriate interactions in the workplace, and spotlighting contributions from people who have been marginalized.
3. **Train seriously and often**, so that this may reduce the occurrence of backlash and prove more effective in terms of entrenching the key lessons into the workplace environment.
4. **Promote more women and people from marginalized groups** as evidence has shown that companies and organizations with more diverse leaderships tend to endure fewer cases of abuse or intolerance.
5. **Encourage reporting** by promoting a "feedback-rich environment." This can take the form of changes in HR policy to reward managers who – during an

initial period – receive more notifications of concerns from within their units. Further, multiple supervisors should be given the responsibility for receiving complaints and/or concerns, thus ensuring that complainants have a choice of who to talk to and diffusing power dynamics in the workplace.

6. **Ensure proportionality while protecting against reprisals.** First, clarify that while all complaints will be taken seriously and sensitively, not all complaints will lead to dismissal of the perpetrator. This will enable bystanders to overcome their concern that intervening will necessarily lead to severe consequences for the perpetrator. Further, explicitly communicate that bystanders will be protected should they intervene in a situation of abuse and/or intolerance, for example, by establishing a zero-tolerance approach to retaliation.
7. **Evaluate your progress** over the immediate, medium and long-term. This includes fostering a more nuanced approach in associating meaning to what the numbers may be showing. For example, an increase in statistics could be measuring an increase in the willingness to report and an increase in trust, rather than of an actual increase in prevalence which some may argue is evidence for a failed bystander program

Further research/gaps in the literature

There is limited research available on the role and efficacy of bystander intervention, specifically in relation to the LGBTQ2¹ community and people with disabilities. Moreover, the literature that is available is outdated (SJ, K, and JG 2012; Stevens 2012). Similarly, there is also an emerging field in research, in terms of bystander intervention in virtual workplaces as a result of the changing nature of work during the pandemic, and in technological advancements in the 21st century and beyond. As well, this aspect of bystander intervention is situated in an ongoing debate as to what constitutes cyberbullying and what it could mean in virtual workplaces. Lastly, it is also worth noting that during the compilation of existing bystander intervention resources for further reading, most of the resources available online focused on intervening in gender-based violence (GBV) situations (e.g. a man groping a woman in public transit). However, the pilot bystander intervention training being developed includes a broader scope of inappropriate behaviour that may occur in a workplace setting, including GBV.

All things considered, it may be beneficial to undertake updated research on these topics, to ground bystander intervention training even further.

¹ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Two-Spirit

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