Journal of the International Ombuds Association

An Unusual Harassment Training that was Warmly Received—and, as well, Inspired Bystanders—an Organizational Ombuds Story

MARY ROWE

ABSTRACT

Harassment and bullying are hard to endure and hard to stop. Many targets and bystanders fear to ask for help, fearing loss of relationships and other painful consequences. All organizations need training. However, sensitivity training about harassment is now unwelcome to many, and it is hard to prove such training is effective in terms of achieving desirable outcomes. This essay describes an effort to teach supervisors *how to receive harassment concerns competently and effectively*. Faculty and staff supervisors were asked to critique the performance of peers on videos—who were kind but making common mistakes—for their strengths and weaknesses as complaint-handlers. The training was voluntary, very well received, and effective in several different ways. Many organizations might adapt such training for their front-line supervisors.

KEYWORDS

harassment training, sexual harassment, racial harassment, bullying, inspiring bystanders, complaint-handling for front-line supervisors

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I extend warm appreciation for Professor Jay Keyser of MIT, and to his harassment training team. I also thank two kind and skillful editors: Martha Mangelsdorf (MIT) and Hans Kohler (JIOA) and two anonymous reviewers who were very helpful.

Harassment training is difficult to assess. It is sometimes found to be very helpful—and sometimes deemed useless or associated with unfortunate outcomes (Dobbin & Kalev, 2020). There are many methodological hurdles in accurately assessing training. However, providing *some* kind of training about harassment can seem important since it seems likely that no organization has satisfactorily prevented harassment and bullying. Harassment has proven to be a singularly tenacious and destructive phenomenon calling for committed, steady-state attention nearly everywhere.

Did I ever see harassment training that I knew was helpful to at least some of the faculty and managers who took it? This essay is about an unusual initiative with good effects lasting for years. Many harassment programs have focused on teaching about the unacceptable nature of harassment. The method of focusing on frontline supervisors—like faculty and staff in a university—as *complaint handlers* may be useful to all of those engaged in harassment training. Laws, regulations, and policies have changed since the events recounted here, and training would need to be tailored accordingly. Nevertheless, the idea of faculty and staff learning to be *receptive and competent* in dealing with targets and bystanders of harassment may be useful forever. The same may be true for training frontline supervisors in corporate and government sectors.

HOW DID THIS HARASSMENT TRAINING INITIATIVE COME ABOUT?

In the mid-1980s, Professor Jay Keyser, an MIT Associate Provost at MIT, considered how to make further progress with respect to harassment; he consulted with me among others. I welcomed the idea; we needed to do more. The nation had begun to take notice of harassment in 1980. MIT had been working on this issue since 1973, with various groups and committees discussing and revising policies about sexual and racial harassment. Thanks to many student, staff and faculty affinity groups and receptive senior officers who kept the subject alive, complaints and concerns kept coming—to all the relevant MIT channels, including the Ombuds office, where I worked. I observed that specific complaints did get addressed, one by one, in most cases. Some proven offenders were disciplined, and a few, including several persons of high rank, were fired for criminal transgressions.

However, with each new case it seemed that a stronger systems approach was much needed across MIT. As far as I knew, MIT was the first large organization in the nation to have a harassment policy, but many people still were oblivious—and some who suffered faced barriers. Some targets and bystanders felt ignored, blamed, or disrespected.

WHAT WAS THE ATMOSPHERE LIKE?

The former and then president, and both academic and administrative councils were supportive of taking further actions, as was the director of the MIT Lincoln Laboratory. The Lincoln Laboratory had had mandatory diversity programming in the 1970s. These sessions were wryly nicknamed “Charm School,” but appeared to have been somewhat effective in reducing complaints of discrimination and in fostering increased recruitment of people of color and women. Did we just need more training?

Associate Provost Keyser, a famous linguist and former department head, had led broad initiatives to support students to talk about harassment. He decided next to offer sexual and racial harassment discussions to all faculty and staff on campus. However, MIT faced a common dilemma: many faculty and staff clearly *needed* training in the sense that they ignored the problem—and some faculty and staff were themselves perceived as harassers. However, everyone was deeply tired of preaching and lectures—and deeply focused on their own work 365/24. Few, thought Keyser, would want to come for a workshop labeled “harassment training.”

WHAT DID WE DECIDE TO DO?

"What could engage faculty and staff?" Keyser asked. "How can we get anyone to come?" At the time he asked, I was doing research about how to help targets of harassment and bystanders to act or come forward about unacceptable behavior. Targets and bystanders face major barriers in dealing with or reporting harassment (Rowe, Wilcox & Gadlin, 2009); they poignantly need receptive and competent supervisors and managers. I offered an option: "Instead of *preaching* to MIT colleagues about harassment, invite them to become skilled complaint-handlers."

I knew that it is difficult to measure the effectiveness of training of this kind. I thought, therefore, that I would privately try to think about how to understand if the new initiative would make any difference in peoples' behavior—so I dutifully wrote down some goals for myself. My goals were three:

1) Associate Provost Jay Keyser was an engaging and powerful leader for such an effort. His sessions could be a way to make sure that more people knew something about harassment and MIT policies.
2) The sessions might put some possible harassers on notice and maybe even affect their behavior.
3) If more faculty and staff were perceived as receptive and competent in dealing with harassment concerns, more targets and bystanders would turn to them for help and fewer would be ignored or feel disrespected.

THE VIDEOS

Keyser commissioned training videos depicting several (very courageous) senior MIT leaders receiving concerns about racial, sexual, and religious harassment. I asked each senior leader—they mostly were playing themselves—to make some classic complaint-handling mistakes. They were to be their ordinary kind and respectful selves—however, I suggested, they also would appear to be almost too busy to listen. They might occasionally free associate… and then of course digress to talk about themselves. If the complainant asked, the complaint-handler might inappropriately promise absolute confidentiality, no matter the subject.

These senior leaders proved excellent actors.

Professor Keyser, himself a brilliant teacher, took the videos to every department, inviting every faculty member (repeatedly if necessary, so they could find a session that fit their schedule.) He told his many dozens of audiences that their courageous senior colleagues had been instructed to "make some mistakes" in complaint handling. The audience was to focus on *effective, receptive complaint handling, and—of course—to discuss any mistakes*.

Two-thirds of the total faculty, and perhaps 900 staff members, rose to the challenge over about five years. They asked dozens of questions, sometimes beginning with a surprised, "Does MIT have an actual *policy*? May I have a copy?" They also chatted in detail in each session, sometimes arguing with each other and thereby helping less respectful colleagues to begin to understand the issues.

Faculty and staff came voluntarily and, mostly, with interest. (As Keyser wryly noted, "What MIT people do well is to critique the performance of colleagues.") The sessions, and Keyser's consistent, upbeat, warm, contagious humor and commitment, were warmly received. Keyser also followed up with surveys for some years, keeping the issues alive.

THE THREE GOALS AND AN UNEXPECTED BENEFIT

In the Ombuds office, I thought these sessions were a remarkable and proven success for several years, in terms of my three goals. Many hundreds of copies of MIT policy were requested and distributed and discussed. Faculty and administrators helped to keep the issues alive over a period of years. Some instituted regular discussions in their laboratories and with their teaching assistants. Complaints of harassment against faculty and staff dropped sharply during that period. I knew that more faculty and staff were being perceived as "receptive" to people with concerns, because various faculty and staff I had not met were suddenly referring people to the relevant MIT channels, including the Ombuds office.

THE IMPORTANCE OF INSPIRING POWERFUL BYSTANDERS

What I had not imagined, at the beginning, was a fourth, vital bit of success. Some faculty and staff became active and effective *bystanders* among colleagues at MIT and elsewhere, regularly intervening or reporting or remediating harassment and bullying. For more than three decades, I regularly heard stories of bystander interventions, at MIT and elsewhere, by faculty and staff who mentioned to me that they had attended the complaint-handler sessions Keyser had led. Some of their interventions were about various kinds of interpersonal abuse; some were about other unacceptable behavior. Since I believe that the principal constraints on unacceptable behavior by very powerful people are…other powerful people (Rowe, 2021), I came to see this specific outcome as a critically important benefit from Professor Keyser's unusual initiative.

There is broad discussion of voluntary harassment training as superior to mandatory training[1]. There is, now, some discussion of training managers to become alert *intervenors* with unacceptable behavior in their units, and to become effective *bystanders*, themselves, with peers[2]. In addition, training faculty and staff—including frontline supervisors and leadership at all levels—to be receptive and competent *complaint-handlers* can be a broadly effective and well-received form of harassment training. In addition, training frontline staff may expedite the handling of harassment concerns.

[1] Daniel Spokojny Podcast https://www.fp21.org/podcast/episode-7-train-the-bosses
[2] Ibid (the podcast) and also Dobbin and Kalev (2020).

REFERENCES

Dobbin, F., & Kalev, A. (2020). Why sexual harassment programs backfire. *Harvard Business Review*, 98 (3), 45-52.

Rowe, M., Wilcox, L., & Gadlin, H. (2009). Dealing with--or reporting—"unacceptable" behavior. *Journal of the International Ombudsman Association*, *2*(1), http://mitsloan.mit.edu/shared/ods/documents?PublicationDocumentID=5397.

Rowe, M. P. (2021). Bystanders: "See something, say something" is not enough. *Alternatives to the High Cost of Litigation*, 39 (10), 153-165. Download Preprint.

Spokojny, Daniel, (2022). Podcast 5/11/21: In *Train the Bosses* https://www.fp21.org/podcast/episode-7-train-the-bosses

AUTHOR BIO

Mary Rowe PhD is an Adjunct Professor of Negotiation and Conflict Management at the MIT Sloan School of Management and taught this subject for twenty years. She served for almost 42 years as an organizational ombuds reporting directly to five presidents of MIT. (jmprf@comcast.net)

Publications: https://mitmgmtfaculty.mit.edu/mrowe/research/

Archives Collections:
https://dome.mit.edu/handle/1721.3/190973 and
https://dome.mit.edu/handle/1721.3/190929