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Applied allyship and other strategies for protecting against sexual harassment

By Ashley Dubriwny, CCEP-I, Med, Curriculum Design & Adult Instruction

In December, I facilitated my last live training on protecting against sexual harassment after a year of raising awareness for key teams and continually adjusting content to better meet the challenges of an evolving workspace. I use the word "workspace" intentionally, as this material goes beyond the workplace and extends to those working in the field, at events, in hotels, and even home offices.

After the December training, several attendees stayed online to share that the material presented was completely different than what they had seen before and what they had come to expect. One attendee noted, "I've sat through dozens of these trainings in my career, and I've never heard these messages. I can take this back to my team and implement it this week!"

How did we do it? We decided we weren't building this training for bad actors. Let's be honest; how many bad actors are transformed by training? Rather than focusing on forbidden behaviors or simply reviewing policy, we created a workshop meant for allies. Applied allyship gives individuals, teams, and leaders a framework for identifying risk, raising awareness, and offering practical steps so they know exactly what allyship looks like in application.

Power dynamics

We can't discuss sexual harassment without discussing the role of power. Power dynamics are often thought of in relationship to organizational hierarchy, and most people are acutely aware of when they are in a power-down position within their organization. We asked staff to identify when they or their teams were in a power-*up* position. We must consider power dynamics beyond simple reporting structures to do this effectively. We identified three hidden power dynamics that were most common in our workspace.

First are wealth and resources. While internal individuals and teams wield some degree of wealth or resource power (think annual budget control, events coordination, larger or more resourced teams), this is commonly experienced with our third-party engagement. Acknowledging the impressive power created by wealth and making it clear to staff that the organization's commitment to a safe and respectful workspace applies to everyone—even third parties—is a message we must continually share internally *and* externally.

Second, we identified strength, size, and status as unnamed power dynamics. Regardless of reporting structures, the forces of size, strength, tenure, age, status, and reputation can carry magnificent conscious and unconscious influence. Raising awareness of how these types of power can manifest in everyday work, helping staff recognize their own power-up positions, and offering them practical mitigation strategies are important steps in creating

workspaces that encourage psychological safety.

Lastly, we identified groupthink as a subtle yet potent power dynamic. The weight of influence that can be exercised due to a group's collective social power cannot be underestimated. Discussing the variety of ways this can show up in terms of gender, race, political association, religion, alcohol use, and more allows staff to identify their own potential for groupthink and work toward heightened understanding and sensitivity.