

2024 Public Description of Work for Action Collaborative on Preventing Sexual Harassment in Higher Education

Harvard University

Leveraging Your Leadership: How Promoting Team Psychological Safety Can Activate Bystander Intervention in Your Organization

Relevant Rubric Area(s):

1. Leadership Education and Skill Development
2. Bystander Intervention Programs (specific to higher education or field, and/or audience).
3. Prevention Program or Toolkits

Description of Work:

- **Purpose and goals:** This educational program for staff, student, and faculty organizations is designed to help those with significant authority or influence in their organizations (such as managers, supervisors, and/or directors) to a) recognize the role that team psychological safety plays in empowering members to speak up, and b) adopt strategies for promoting team psychological safety in their organizations.
- **Impetus:** Team psychological safety is defined by Amy Edmondson, of Harvard Business School, as “a shared belief held by members of a team that it’s okay to take risks, to express their ideas and concerns, to speak up with questions, and to admit mistakes — all without fear of negative consequences” (Edmondson, 2019). Psychological safety, as a construct, is arguably the basis for active bystander intervention in organizations, in which much intervention occurs on a verbal, interpersonal level among peers who know one another.

While much training and program evaluation in the past decade has focused on the need for active bystanders in organizations of all kinds across higher education, few have focused on the antecedents to active bystander intervention. In other words, for members of any organization to speak up when discriminatory conduct occurs, they must feel *safe* doing so. Organization leaders play a significant role in generating and maintaining team psychological safety for their followers. Similarly, in organizations where dimensions of psychological safety are practiced and normative, peers may also serve as models for fellow organization members.

- **Program Description:** The Prevention Initiatives team in the Harvard University Office for Gender Equity sought to create an experiential learning and development program, as well as a suite of resources, that helps organization leaders to informally evaluate team psychological safety in their organizations, identify opportunities for development, and practice strategies for fostering team psychological safety with the goal of making organizations safer for bystander intervention.

In one example, to better understand the issues affecting a department, the OGE Prevention Initiatives Team utilized a dialogic approach (that is, an exploratory, dialogue-based consulting approach) when meeting with department staff members, who sought support for improving their workplace climate on gender-related matters. The team worked with organization members at all levels of the organization

2024 Public Description of Work for Action Collaborative on Preventing Sexual Harassment in Higher Education

(including affinity groups, mid-level managers, and the two top executives of the organization) to develop four (4) learning cohorts to each undergo a 3-hour learning and development experience focused on community climate, team psychological safety, and active bystander intervention in the workplace.

Learning objectives included:

As a result of participating in this learning experience, leaders will be able to:

1. Define the role of team psychological safety in assessing and addressing organizational climate;
2. Describe how team psychological safety influences active bystander intervention in the workplace;
3. Engage in strategies to promote team psychological safety in your organization, including being able to: take risks; express ideas and concerns; speak up with questions; admit mistakes;
4. Model active bystander intervention strategies in their organizations; and
5. Refer to supportive resources for those who may have experienced harm in their organizations.

The four (4) cohorts met with a facilitator from the OGE Prevention Initiatives team between October-December 2023, in groups of 10-15 managers/leaders. The setting for the experience was a small conference room in a roundtable style. A PowerPoint slide deck was utilized to guide the conversation, and custom worksheets were primarily used for managers to individually reflect on their impressions, experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of factors that pose a threat to psychological safety in their organizations, and opportunities to address such factors.

Managers/leaders additionally received distilled, anonymized feedback from members of their own departments to add to their own reflections, and to develop strategies for addressing concerns following the learning experience. Finally, managers/leaders worked in pairs and small groups through case scenarios developed with anonymous input from organization members to apply theoretical learning to true-to-life situations.

Members of each cohort were invited to participate in an anonymous 2-question survey both immediately before the experience, and immediately following the experience. On average, managers/leaders reported a 40% increase (between pre- and post- session surveys) in feeling prepared to promote psychological safety in their organizations. Participants reported a 48% increase in feeling prepared to engage in active bystander intervention in their organizations. (Of note, there was attrition between the pre- and post- session surveys, and follow-up is needed to see if the effect of the program was sustained.)

- **Case for Innovation:** This type of prevention programming appears to be rare, in part because it utilizes a dialogic organizational development framework, rather than solely a public health or adult learning theory model in a workshop or training. The program itself relies heavily on dialogue, data collection, and process consulting with multiple layers of an organization prior to the design, implementation, and evaluation of the learning activity itself. The program likewise invites leaders to self-reflect on their strengths and growing edges in terms of organizational structure and culture, and to identify areas where they might shift how they use power in situations where organization members need help, make mistakes, or struggle to speak up.

2024 Public Description of Work for Action Collaborative on Preventing Sexual Harassment in Higher Education

- **Recent Developments:** The OGE Prevention Initiatives team reported results and insights, along with considerations, to the executive leadership team of this organization. Since then, the team has augmented and tailored the program and implemented amended versions to student organizations. The team is also adopting a version of this to be used at a faculty-staff retreat as part of a diversity initiatives program for a large organization in the University. The program has garnered much interest, and the team looks forward to honing activities, learning resources, and opportunities for community members to draw connections between team psychological safety and active bystander intervention.
- **Plans for Evaluation:** More evaluation of the effectiveness of such programming is needed. While initial quantitative data is promising, it would be exciting and appropriate to seek out a more complete program evaluation with a larger sample, and to incorporate validated scales (i.e., the Fearless Organization Scan) as part of assessment.
- **Implications for Future Use:** The future of this program will be informed by community interest and developments in research on both team psychological safety and active bystander intervention. In the year ahead, the Harvard University Office for Gender Equity plans to continue implementing this program with additional groups and utilizing multiple means of assessing its reception and effectiveness.
- **Contacts:** To learn more about this initiative and to explore potential collaboration, please contact oge@harvard.edu.

Website for further information (if applicable): www.oge.harvard.edu

Point of Contact Name: Rachel DiBella, Associate Director, Strategic Prevention Initiatives

Email Address for Point of Contact: oge@harvard.edu