

# Sexual Harassment Training Isn't Just a Waste of Time: It's Harmful

The last time you had to sit through a training program or sign your office's fine-print disclosure on sexual harassment policy, you probably thought you were just wasting your time. You were wrong: Research suggests that efforts to raise awareness and train employees about sexual harassment may be worse than a waste. They may actually lead to *more* tolerance for sexual harassment, as well a greater reliance on stereotypes and more animosity between the sexes.

A [research team at Stanford](#), for example, used an experiment in which one group of men heard a sexual harassment policy before conducting a task with an unseen female partner. The researchers found that, compared to a control group, these men were more likely to believe "most people think both men and women are lower status, less competent, and less considerate," and personally thought "everybody was lower in status." [Another study](#) of participants in a sexual harassment training seminar found that "[m]ale participants were less likely than other groups to perceive coercive sexual harassment, less willing to report sexual harassment, and more likely to blame the victim."

So much for sensitivity training. These findings may surprise the writers at [The Guardian](#) and [New York Magazine](#), but probably seem pretty obvious to the rest of us. Few people forced to read legalese or watch stilted programming about Johnny and Jane learning appropriate office behavior feel affirmed and inspired to be more respectful to others. Rather, such programs tend to remind us of everything that's wrong with our culture, with people assuming the worst of each other and forcing everyone to walk on eggshells lest they offend

someone else.

The researchers studying the impact of these training programs acknowledge that they may be inadvertently activating “gender stereotypes rather than challenging them,” and that men who already feel women enjoy a double standard—welcoming sexual attention in some circumstances but also able to claim harassment—may feel their suspicions are confirmed. One researcher blamed these unwelcome results on the content of training, which tends to rely on cartoonish examples.

That may be true, but the flaws in the training programs also speak to the more fundamental problem of the selective and arbitrary nature of sexual harassment categorizations themselves. We all know that in the real world, the off-color joke told by the cool male coworker may be deemed acceptable office banter, but when it’s uttered by the awkward, pot-bellied, older guy, then it’s contributing to a hostile environment and becomes potential fodder for a lawsuit. A woman who wants to go out with her colleague or even her supervisor may well be flattered when he makes an advance, but the hapless guy who mistakenly thought she was interested can end up in big trouble.

Sexual harassment training experts suggest that companies should set clear guidelines and consequences. But companies only have so much discretion since the law invites litigation not just for egregious situations, such as a boss coercing an underling or offering perks for sexual favors, but for more nebulous situations that could be the result of mere misunderstandings, differences in people’s sense of humor, or a romantic partnership gone bad. Since nearly [40 percent of workers admit](#) to having dated a coworker, there will inevitably be many grey areas and misunderstandings about what’s within the parameters of normal adult relationships and what’s out-of-bounds.

People who are genuinely interested in promoting greater

respect and understanding among the sexes, and among different groups of people more broadly, ought to consider the implications of these findings, and how other awareness-raising efforts might similarly be backfiring. College campuses, for example, have increasingly prioritized encouraging—even requiring—students to ruminate on social problems, whether they're the problems faced by women, transgendered students, African-Americans, or other minority groups. Yet this approach hardly seems to be healing divisions or reducing conflict. [Surveys suggest race relations](#) are at a twenty-year low. Undoubtedly there are many reasons for this unhappy reality, but it's worth considering how dwelling on our differences and encouraging people to focus on society's problems may be giving those problems more power, rather than less.

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