

Creating A Safe Space In Training Sessions For Both Trainers And Trainees



In recent years, we have seen important shifts in how employers are working to prevent and address harassment, discrimination, and violence in the workplace. As part of their efforts, employers are increasingly implementing training on these topics as a proactive measure. Unfortunately, given the sensitivity of these topics, there have been reports of safety concerns raised by trainers and trainees during training sessions. A couple incidents reported in the media are prime examples of the concerns being raised. The first pertains to a police officer who was accused of verbal assault during a training session on missing, murdered Indigenous women.¹ Another relates to a firm that claimed that a City Council showed a lack of respect and hostility in a training session related to equity, diversity, and inclusion; as a result, the firm no longer agreed to work with them.²

The news has sparked debates about how to conduct training sessions safely and effectively. What can employers and trainers do to create a safe space for trainers and trainees, so that they do not inadvertently create a situation that they had set out to prevent? As trainers at Rubin Thomlinson, we have reflected on our own experiences, the unique challenges that we have faced when conducting training on sensitive topics, and the considerations that we have made to create a safe space. This is the first in a series of blogs outlining techniques and considerations when working to provide safe spaces for meaningful and sensitive discussions during training sessions. In this opening blog, we have set out three important considerations for employers and trainers when preparing for training sessions.

1. Select an appropriate trainer

A trainer's role is to educate and facilitate discussions that relate to sensitive topics in a way that is free from judgment and harm. To be effective, the trainer ought to be well-versed on the subject matter and have the appropriate skills and expertise to facilitate a discussion that allows for both open and respectful dialogue. If employers feel that they may lack the relevant expertise internally, they may consider whether to engage external trainers.

2. Consider what the audience may need to know before the training session

Many organizations are willing to invest in training because they are committed to creating a safe workplace; some have even made training mandatory for all. However, when training is imposed without any communication to or input from their employees, they may be less receptive to the training. Often when we have faced pushback in a training session, it has been because of internal unresolved issues or because trainees make assumptions about why the training is being conducted. Trainees may then take the opportunity, during the session, to (i) question the trainer on why their company has chosen to have training, (ii) wonder whether they (the trainees) are “in trouble,” (iii) press for information about their organization, and/or (iv) make hostile remarks to the trainer. To reduce the likelihood of this type of response, employers should consider communicating the purpose of training to their employees so that they not only have an awareness, but also an opportunity to provide preliminary feedback. Doing so may lead to increased engagement and a positive outcome at the training session.

For external trainers, there is value in understanding the context in which the training is being provided. For example, it may assist to understand whether training has been requested by the organization as part of routine training, or whether it was triggered by an internal conflict. A trainer can use this information to make any recommendations regarding communications to be issued to employees, tailor their content, and prepare themselves for their anticipated audience.

3. Anticipate discomfort and pushback

When discussing sensitive topics like harassment and discrimination, the conversations may sometimes feel uncomfortable. Part of facilitating a training session is becoming comfortable with discomfort, facing sensitive conversations head-on, and helping trainees do the same. In preparation for training, trainers should anticipate the types of questions that may be asked, the topics that may lead to pushback, and assess potential triggers (for the trainer and trainees). While considering these questions, assess how to respond effectively and guide trainees in a positive direction, as opposed to avoiding or shutting down difficult conversations.

The question for a trainer when preparing for training is how to approach these topics in a way that protects everyone’s dignity. Stay tuned for Part 2 of this series, where we further explore considerations for training sessions.

Footnote

1. Jody Porter, “Police accused of verbal assault during training session on missing, murdered Indigenous women” (September 13, 2016), online: *CBC News* < <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/thunder-bay/thunder-bay-police-mmiv-training-1.3758791> >

2. “‘Lack of respect’: Toronto firm backs out of working with Sarnia council after diversity training session” (February 24, 2022), online: *CBC News* < <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/windsor/sarnia-kojo-institute-1.6362324> >

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