

Grace Judson



Why HR Programs Fail

Diversity
Sensitivity training
Sexual harassment
Workplace anti-bullying
Health and wellness

a white paper from Grace Judson

~ empowered leadership ~



Why HR Programs Fail

Diversity and sensitivity training. Sexual harassment classes. Workplace anti-bullying programs. Health and wellness.

Diversity and sensitivity training. Sexual harassment prevention. Workplace anti-bullying programs. Health and wellness.

In spite of all attempts to paint a rosier picture, the evidence continues to mount.

These programs don't work.

In fact, in some cases these programs can actually make things worse. An article in *Fortune* magazine, "Leading While Black," (McGirt 2016) reported on research showing that diversity policies – and by implication, diversity training programs – create resentment and a perception of bias among white employees.

Yet, according to that same article, 90% of the *Fortune* 100 companies have a Chief Diversity Officer. And all states have laws prohibiting sexual harassment, with a wide variety of requirements for training and prevention programs.

Here again, though, these programs aren't as effective as we would like to believe. For instance, in 2013 California was one of five states in the U.S. with the highest percentage of reported harassment incidents in the country – yet California has

*Even wellness programs have **almost no** short-term impact.*

mandated sexual harassment training for *years*. (Knezevich 2014) And while as of this writing workplace bullying isn't yet against the law in any state, some forward-thinking organizations provide training programs intended to prevent bullying between their employees. There's no research as yet on their effectiveness, but given the statistics for similar programs, what are the odds?

Meanwhile, the program that's the darling of employers and employees alike - workplace wellness - gets extremely mixed reviews. In the end, though, according to a congressionally-mandated research report completed by RAND Corp in late 2012, even wellness programs have almost no short-term impact, and only minimal, if any, long-term impact on changing employees' health and fitness habits. (Begley 2014) Furthermore, the savings cited by some companies appear to be the result of cost offsets from higher insurance rates for those who don't participate or don't succeed in sponsored weight-loss or smoking-cessation programs. (Frakt & Carroll 2014; Munro 2013)

Why do diversity, harassment, and bullying programs fail, and why do wellness programs appear to be only a bit more successful?

And what can be done in your organization to beat the odds and create a sustainably supportive workplace across all these areas?

Academic training approaches aren't effective when dealing with emotional topics.

The training programs are academic - and often giggle-inducing

Let's face it: many programs, whether e-learning or face-to-face, are more than a little hokey. Faced with a program that fails to build credibility through real-world and really-challenging examples, or one that's outdated enough to make us giggle, we're just not going to learn much. (Anderson 2016)

On a more serious note, training programs are, by definition, designed to teach principles and concepts.

This is great if we're teaching mathematics or how to write computer code. It's not so great when we're talking about topics that touch on people's emotions, values, or sense of identity.

And yet bias, sexuality, power, body image, eating habits – these are all emotional topics, often *very* emotional. They deal with how people see themselves, who they believe themselves to be, and what groups or tribes they identify with.

The risks of change

Any change feels risky; these identity-based, emotionally-charged changes feel tremendously risky and therefore highly unappealing.

*We make
decisions
**emotionally, not
intellectually.**
Logic is a back-
up tool, not a
primary force, in
our choices.*

If someone chooses to step outside the norms of their identity group, will they be outcast, ridiculed, chastised, or otherwise punished in some way?

What fears of “other” do they have? What have they been taught throughout their lives – especially in childhood – about safety and the trustworthiness of those “not like us”?

What beliefs and fears do they have about power and their own effectiveness – or lack thereof – in wielding power?

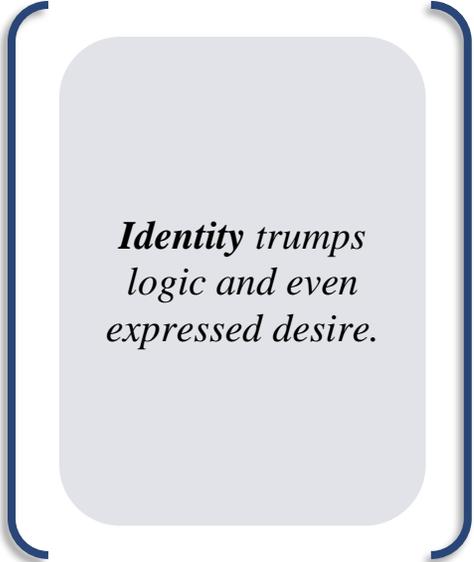
What do they believe about sexuality and their ability to attract a mate; do they see themselves as irresistibly gorgeous, or desperately unattractive?

How entrenched are they in habitual patterns of eating, exercise, and other health-related behaviors?

All these issues are emotional

We don't make decisions, especially big life-style, identity-changing decisions, based on our intellect; we make them first and foremost out of our emotional experience. Only then do we use logic and intellect to rationalize the emotional choice we've already made.

Therefore, we don't “decide” to welcome diversity, behave respectfully, or go to the company-sponsored gym. We *feel* our way into these choices – and when feelings are at stake, the



*Identity trumps
logic and even
expressed desire.*

process of changing behavior simply doesn't happen in a half-day workshop.

When someone feels emotionally attached to the group they identify with, they have a significant internal commitment to staying a part of that group, even if, in the long run, it's not in their best interests.

For instance, someone with diabetes may very well have a strong, albeit largely unconscious, commitment to remaining a member of the group called "diabetics." It's part of their identity, part of what they believe about themselves and who they are. They may have friends who are diabetic; they may be receiving love and nurturing from their families because they're diabetic; they may appreciate the attention, or even the opportunity to create drama, if their diabetes becomes severe.

(I'm not picking on diabetics. Substitute whatever group you like in these statements. It's true for bullies, who identify with the group called "powerful" or even "leaders"; it's true for harassers, who might see themselves as part of the group called "irresistibly attractive"; and these days it seems as if we hear stories every day about members of racist, discriminatory groups who are deeply proud of their commitment to their cause.)

On the logical level, this may sound crazy. But we're not dealing with logic; we're dealing with emotion. And these emotional

*Training must take the risk and go into **emotional responses** in order to be **effective**.*

attachments and internal commitments are the root cause of every instance of resistance to change, whether at the corporate level, the team or group level, the family level, or the individual level. (New Year's resolutions, anyone?)

People may have a conscious, intellectual, and heartfelt desire to change – to welcome diversity, to stop inflicting fear, rage, humiliation, and anger on others, to respect and appreciate all people regardless of race, religion, or gender, to feel better physically and emotionally. But as long as the underlying competing commitment to maintaining the status quo, for whatever reason (safety, group identity, etc.), remains in place, the change is not going to happen.

(Of course, they also may *not* truly desire to change; this introduces another set of challenges and questions about cultural fit within your organization, which I touch on in a companion paper to this which you can download [here](#).)

And that's why HR training programs on these emotionally-fraught topics fail.

The programs fail because the program designers, facilitators, teachers, and leaders don't "go there" – they don't go into emotional discussions, they don't touch on the feelings of vulnerability, guilt, shame, defensiveness, or self-righteousness

*Is there ROI in
sponsoring
Fitbit? Maybe ...
and maybe not.*

that inevitably come up when we challenge people to examine their belief structures about themselves and who they are.

Instead, they stay in the intellectual realm of how people “should” behave. It’s safe there, and of course there’s common agreement (or at least lip service) that how they “should” behave is logically true.

But until the creators and leaders of these programs take the time and effort to “go there” with the emotional realities, the programs will continue to fail.

Health and wellness

All that said, I mentioned earlier that health and wellness programs appear to do a bit better than the others.

A 2016 article in *Fast Company* reported that some organizations are handing out Fitbit fitness trackers to their employees, launching internal Fitbit challenges that seem to have some success. (Farr 2016)

Technology is always fun; we like our electronic gadgets!

Yet I noticed a few things about the statistics they cite from four organizations that created Fitbit-based programs.

To take one example, they tell us that an impressive 23,000 employees received company-sponsored Fitbits at BP America,

*News flash:
intrinsic
motivation
matters!*

but they don't say how many U.S.-based employees there are in total (recent reports show 69,000 worldwide employees). Out of those 23,000 they report that just 2,000, or 8.7%, actually completed the Fitbit Challenge. That's not much, though it is something – although it's actually only 2.9% of the entire worldwide employee population.

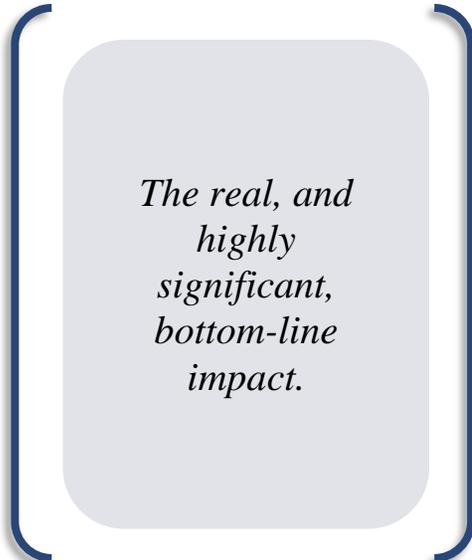
Nonetheless, why *are* these programs somewhat more effective?

Because people who engage with them tend to be people who have motivations aside from “my boss told me to go.”

In general, these are people who were already self-motivated to work out, eat better, and take care of themselves. They may already have been part of a workout program or a member of a gym, and simply switched over when given the company-sponsored opportunity. Or they may not have had any options open to them until the company-sponsored program became available. Or they may have been thinking about doing something, and their employer's program was the push they needed to get going.

I'm not saying experiments with wellness programs are insignificant or shouldn't be undertaken.

However, I am saying that even with these somewhat-more-effective efforts, the challenges I've described still apply.



The real, and highly significant, bottom-line impact.

The business case

The cost of these failures to businesses is overwhelming.

Obviously there are immediate costs involved in handling harassment complaints (not to mention handing out hundreds – or thousands! – of Fitbits). These expenditures of time, money, and energy – including legal representation, litigation, and court awards – are in and of themselves significant.

However, as the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) Task Force on the Study of Harassment in the Workplace notes in their 2016 report, “These are only the most visible and headline-grabbing expenses. They also only address employees who report harassment, which ... may account for only a fraction of the harassment that occurs.” (Feldblum & Lipnic 2016)

The hidden costs run far higher, especially in light of the more-recent reports of rampant harassment in virtually any industry you care to name.

Lost productivity, disengagement, increased sick time, increased turnover, damage to the brand reputation – these factors add up quickly, their impact reaches well beyond the individual(s) directly involved, and they have a significant negative impact on an organization’s bottom line.

“Training has the most positive benefits on those who need it least...”

In short, it’s an expensive problem, in terms of both financial and human cost.

And yet, the data consistently show that prevention programs don’t work.

In June of 2015, the EEOC Task Force on the Study of Harassment in the Workplace conducted hearings on training effectiveness.

Eden King, associate professor of psychology at George Mason University, was one of the presenters at the hearing. Her research showed that, “Training has the most positive benefits on those who need it least, not the ones who are most biased.” (Smith 2015)

The irony is unmistakable.

And nothing changes. In June of 2016, in a 95-page report to the EEOC, the co-chairs of the Task Force wrote,

Training Must Change. Much of the training done over the last 30 years has not worked as a prevention tool – it’s been too focused on simply avoiding legal liability. We believe effective training can reduce workplace harassment, and recognize that ineffective training can be unhelpful or even counterproductive. However, even effective training cannot occur in a vacuum – it must be part of a holistic culture of non-harassment that starts at the top. Similarly, one size does *not* fit all: Training is most effective when

tailored to the specific workforce and workplace, and to different cohorts of employees. (Feldblum & Lipnic 2016, emphasis theirs)

What they say is completely reasonable and undoubtedly true.

Yet until organizational leaders, training creators, and facilitators *also* recognize the inevitability of emotional reaction to these topics *and incorporate that inevitability into their programs*, the programs will continue to fail those who need them most.

SOURCES

Anderson, L.V. "Those Ethics Trainings Your Job Requires Are Even Dumber Than You Think." Slate Magazine. May 19, 2016. Accessed May 23, 2016.

http://www.slate.com/articles/business/the_ladder/2016/05/ethics_compliance_training_is_a_waste_of_time_here_s_why_you_have_to_do.html.

Begley, Sharon. "Exclusive: 'Workplace Wellness' Fails Bottom Line, Waistlines - RAND." Reuters. May 24, 2014. Accessed May 23, 2016. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-wellness-idUSBRE94N0XX20130524>.

Farr, Christina. "Fitbit at Work." *Fast Company*, May 2016, 27-30. Available online as "How Fitbit Became The Next Big Thing In Corporate Wellness." Accessed June 3, 2016.

<http://www.fastcompany.com/3058462/how-fitbit-became-the-next-big-thing-in-corporate-wellness>.

Feldblum, Chai R., and Victoria A. Lipnic. "Select Task Force on the Study of Harassment in the Workplace: Report of Co-Chairs." EEOC. June 2016. Accessed June 2016.

https://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/task_force/harassment/report.cfm

Frakt, Austin, and Aaron E. Carroll. "Do Workplace Wellness Programs Work? Usually Not." The New York Times. September 11, 2014. Accessed May 23, 2016.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/12/upshot/do-workplace-wellness-programs-work-usually-not.html>.

Knezevich, Cindy. "New EEOC Stats Show Critical Need for Workplace Harassment Training." The Network, Inc. April 11, 2014. Accessed May 23, 2016.

<https://www.tnwinc.com/7382/workplace-harassment-training-infographic/>.

McGirt, Ellen. "Leading While Black." *Fortune*, February 1, 2016, 76-84. Available online as "Why race and culture matter in the c-suite." Accessed June 3, 2016. <http://fortune.com/black-executives-men-c-suite/>.

Munro, Dan. "RAND Corporation (Briefly) Publishes Sobering Report On Workplace Wellness Programs." Forbes. May 28, 2013.

Accessed May 23, 2016.

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/danmunro/2013/05/28/rand-corporation-briefly-publishes-sobering-report-on-workplace-wellness-programs/>.

Smith, Allen, J.D. "EEOC Hearing: Make Anti-Harassment Training More Effective." Society for Human Resource Management. June 16, 2015. Accessed May 23, 2016.

<https://www.shrm.org/legalissues/federalresources/pages/anti-harassment-training.aspx>.

About the Author: Grace Judson



I'm a leadership coach and consultant focusing on first-line and recently-promoted managers and supervisors, helping them cross that daunting gap between being *part* of a team, and *leading* a team.

Drawing on my 25 years of corporate experience – including 16 years of executive leadership – plus 13 years of leadership coaching, I work with individuals, teams, and leaders to develop their skills, helping them become the empowered leaders they want to be – and their teams deserve.

I hasten to point out that I'm not as old as all those years of experience might indicate. After all, I started my career as a two-year-old, turning my parents' faces toward each other when they argued, wanting them to see each other instead of fighting. That was the beginning of my lifelong quest to understand what makes people tick – and what makes a good, or even great, leader.

WANT MORE?

Download my mini e-book “The Five Most Challenging Employee Types – and how to manage them” at <https://www.gracejudson.com/most-challenging-employees/>.

Schedule your Leadership Power Profile at <https://gracejudson-calendar.as.me/leadership-power-profile>.