2022 CPM Project

WORKPLACE VIOLENCE & SEXUAL HARRASSMENT TRAINING

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Problem Statement:

The South Carolina Department of Transportation (SCDOT) has a mission of connecting communities and driving our economy through system planning, construction, maintenance and intermodal transportation and freight while serving as the fourth largest state highway system in the nation. In order to successfully fulfill this mission for the State of South Carolina, the agency must ensure that its workforce is properly aligned with the same core values. As an agency with offices in all 46 counties of the state, it can become easy to develop a workplace culture and practices that are more reflective of the specific region and not the core values of the agency as a whole.

The SCDOT currently has an authorized workforce of 5,183 employees with a current filled staff of 3,597. As the agency continues to experience an annual turnover of 17% over the last five years while operating at an approximate 40% vacancy, it's imperative that the mission of the agency isn't lost in the turnover of our workforce. Approximately 30% of our current workforce will be eligible to retire within the next 36-48 months. Over the past five years, the agency has lost approximately 40% of our workforce to retirements and other job opportunities. As if the high turnover was not challenging enough, the agency is now fighting against a shrunken labor market which is creating difficulties in filling vacant positions. This shrinking workforce challenge has become known as the second pandemic in conjunction with COVID-19. The percentage of employees that are looking for employment opportunities has decreased while the number of employees leaving the workforce has increased.

The Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM) reported that last year over 3.95 million workers quit their jobs each month[1]. This mass exodus in the workforce and labor shortage has now been termed as "The Great Resignation". SHRM identified five reasons employees are looking for new opportunities which were better compensation, benefits, work/life balance, career advancement opportunities and acting on previous thoughts of a career change as a result of COVID[2]. SCDOT's core positions such as Highway Maintenance Workers and Engineering positions, experience the highest turnover in the agency. These positions are met with unique recruiting challenges because of the type of environment in which the work is performed, the specialized education required and the salaries allocated for these positions.

During the Great Resignation, employers are forced to find creative ways to make their positions more attractive. Due to this unique time in our country, employers are faced with challenges that are either beyond their control or require expensive solutions. The agency's Highway Maintenance Worker positions work alongside the busy urban and rural roads of South Carolina. These positions work in unpredictable weather conditions and during hazardous weather events such as hurricanes and ice storms. These external work conditions make these positions more challenging to attract candidates and retain current staff. For agencies such as the SC Department of Mental Health, SC Department of Health and Environmental Control and University of South Carolina are experiencing challenges filling positions that require more specialized education and experience such as professors, psychotherapist, psychologist, physicians and environmental scientist. As a result of the high turnover, employers are losing a

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[1] (SHRM, 2022, p 1)
[2] (Mauer and Mirza, 2021, pp 1-2)

workplace culture that can take years to develop. As SCDOT hires new employees, it is imperative that we do not lose the core values of the agency.

In August 2018, in an effort to streamline the human resource functions within the SCDOT and ensure consistent application of processes, we changed the reporting structure of the District Human Resources Managers and District Human Resources Coordinators to reporting directly to the Headquarters' Human Resources Office. The organizational change occurred as a result of the agency's need for consistent applications with federal and state laws and SCDOT policies and procedures. As the Office of Human Resources embarks on this goal of consistently applying rules and regulations statewide, the need to develop a standard Workplace Violence and Sexual Harassment training is a starting point to creating this culture.

The SCDOT requires all new employees to attend a Workplace Violence and Sexual Harassment training in their first 90 days of employment. These classes are facilitated by Human Resources staff in all eight districts throughout the state. Many of SCDOT's projects and emergencies can be unpredictable, therefore it is not uncommon for employees to attend trainings in neighboring districts or counties. Since employees attend trainings across other districts, we increase the risk of employees working beside each other with varying understandings of the Agency's Workplace Violence and Sexual Harassment policies.

While the trainers are expected to cover content specific to the Workplace Violence and Sexual Harassment policies, the information being communicated across all districts is not the same. Due to the lack of standardization, the agency runs the risk of irregular application of policies that employees are expected to adhere to. When information is not consistently and accurately communicated, it increases the probability of employees not following these policies, which in some cases can lead to suspensions and terminations depending on the severity of the

violation. As a result, this can further reduce the number of employees working within the agency while increasing recruitment costs. Most importantly, this impacts the agency's ability to fulfill its mission and strategic plan due to staffing shortages.

Data Collection

The goal of my data collection was to gain an understanding of similarities between SCDOT and other state agencies in their facilitation of workplace violence and sexual harassment training. With an end goal of developing consistent material across the entire agency, I wanted to ensure the modified content was accurate and relevant. Developing a standardized workplace violence and sexual harassment training curriculum for our agency seems to be a similar need with both public and private employers. The data collected for this project was completed through multiple interviews with representatives from South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (SCDHEC), South Carolina Department of Disabilities and Special Needs (SCDDSN), South Carolina Department of Health & Human Services (SCDHHS), Georgia Department of Transportation (GADOT), Century Aluminum and the current trainers of the Workplace Violence and Sexual Harassment training at SCDOT. SCDHEC developed their own in-house training by working closely with their legal and employee relations office to develop their content. SCDDSN, did not have an in-house training but required employees to attend the Anti-Harassment Course developed by the South Carolina Department of Administration. SCDHHS, incorporates discussions about Workplace Violence into their new employee orientation. During this discussion, they will explain the policy and show a workplace violence video. GADOT's process was the most unique in that the Sexual Harassment Policy and training was designed by the Governor's Office and the Georgia State

Human Resources. Century Aluminum did not have a formalized Workplace Violence and Sexual Harassment training, but required employees to sign the policy each year acknowledging receipt and understanding. I decided to interview these individuals as opposed to sending out surveys because I could ask follow-up questions based on the information shared.

Data Analysis

During the data collection phase, there appeared to be a substantial emphasis on identifying the signs of workplace violence and the duty of fellow co-workers to report any possible sign of workplace violence. I assumed this to be the trend because of the upsurge in workplace violence across the country, to include active shooter situations.

The interviews during the data collection phase also demonstrated the inconsistency in how this information is communicated across employers. The fundamentals of these policies apply to most state agencies but are further expanded for agencies such as Higher Education or SCDMH, SCDHEC and SCDDSN which includes language unique to the population they are serving. The uniqueness of communicating this message from each agency proves that the greater focus is in the message and not the method. Each employer has to tailor their communication style to the uniqueness of their workforce and the mission of the agency. The content and expectations of these policies amongst those interviewed were essentially similar but the challenges found in administering these policies were unique to the workforce of each individualized agency or employer. Of all the employers interviewed, SCDHEC's training appeared to be the most similar to SCDOT in that they worked closely with their Employee Relations office to develop content. Also similar to SCDOT, in an effort to emphasize the

importance of this subject, SCDHEC requires in person trainings on sexual harassment and workplace violence during the first 90 days of employment. Both GADOT and SCDDSN used technology to communicate this subject. GADOT's program was more detailed in that they had separate sexual harassment trainings for supervisors and employees and are required to be completed on an annual basis and during new employee orientation. On the other hand, their workplace violence training is completed only during new employee orientation.

Many human resource professionals agree that the proper education of these policies may not prevent every situation from occurring, but it will provide an awareness to all staff on how to quickly identify signs so when these offenses take place they can respond appropriately. In fact, the individual interviewed from SCDHEC stated once they implemented these trainings, they saw an increase in complaints. Although not all of these complaints were substantiated, the impact of the training became obvious because it provided an increased awareness. In the event such offenses take place, as a result of proper education and training, agencies can appropriately address these issues. Finding a solution to developing a coordinated Workplace Violence and Sexual Harassment training should present minimal workplace resistance because this program is housed in Office of Human Resources. It is our responsibility to ensure we are providing quality and accurate human resources related information to our workforce.

The key to effectively implementing this process improvements will be proper communication and clearly articulating its benefits not only for the agency but for supervisors and employees. By communicating how these changes may reduce sexual harassment complaints may help gain support across the agency.

Implementation Plan

As the agency works toward developing a synchronized Workplace Violence and Sexual Harassment training, multiple steps must be followed before implementation can take place. Since the Workplace Violence and Sexual Harassment training is conducted by the Office of Human Resources, this process improvement should not experience much resistance to implement.

The first action that must take place in the process of implementing a consistent statewide training is to gain an understanding of the information each facilitator is communicating. This step is critical because it helps us identify similarities and miscommunicated information. I learned early when in a leadership role that one should seek to understand before making any process improvements. Each trainer is expected to review the policies, show approved videos and discuss multiple scenarios. Once the information being communicated has been identified, the next step would be to look for commonalities with the current information that is being taught and ensure it is consistent with the agency's policies and practices.

In order to implement this plan for uniformed training, it will be necessary to get the input from the current trainers in order to get their buy in. Allowing other facilitators to share from their personal experiences and what they believe is most impactful based on previous trainings will be critical to not only in developing the content for the training, but helping the current facilitators feel as though they are a part of the process improvement. The next step in the plan of action would be to develop a workgroup around the collected content and begin developing the outline for the training. The content would include a combination of best practices, agency policy review and discussions centered on scenarios. After the revised content

has been constructed, we will then train the facilitators on the new content. Once this is complete, the final phase would be to communicate the change to current staff and implement.

The timeframe associated with this project should take between six to eight weeks, which includes dialogue between the facilitators and a presentation of the finalized product. Since many of the District Human Resources team members are new to the agency or their positions, we will conduct a training exclusively for HR to demonstrate training expectations. There may be cost associated with this project because past presentations included situational videos which led to class discussions. These videos create challenges because they are on VHS and some are difficult to see because of their age. In addition, not all districts have copies of these videos and are not able to share in this segment of the training. These videos add significant value to the trainings because of the content and discussion generated. Therefore, the goal will be to identify other videos to be used.

As with any change or new initiative, there will always be potential roadblocks. One of those barriers could include not receiving support from the individuals expected to communicate the change. Many of these facilitators have been conducting these trainings for several years and have adopted their own style and method of communicating this information. The challenge this new initiative can create is the assumption that we are taking away the trainer's ability to use their own creativity and personality by adopting this new presentation method. While we will communicate expectations of this new training to the facilitators, we will emphasize the importance of them using their own personalities to make the training more engaging. Our end goal is to make sure the information being presented is consistent throughout all counties.

The improved use of technology has proven to be an invaluable resource to our agency. Due to the impact of COVID-19, the Agency has become more reliant on technology as a

method of training. This has given the agency employees the ability to attend multiple meetings from anywhere in the state. This new training outline will be a recipient of the same media systems such as Microsoft Teams and WebEx which aids us in facilitating this training to larger populations of employees while minimizing travel and more flexibility to schedules.

While this change in training has no impact on new employees, it will impact the staff that previously attended these trainings because there may be new content not previously covered. With that being said, I would strongly recommend that all employees who previously took the class be required to attend the revised training within 24 months from the launch of this new initiative. With a workforce of almost 4,000 employees, this will be a massive and aggressive undertaking; but because of media platforms such as WebEx or Microsoft Teams, we have the capability of impacting larger groups of employees at one time. Many of our stakeholders such as supervisors and employees may be opposed to sitting through this training again. My message to leadership explaining the necessity to train staff again would be to remind them of HR's role of ensuring employees are properly educated on related topics. As outlined in SCDOT's policies, we take sexual harassment and workplace violence accusations very seriously and this is an opportunity to show our staff the value this sensitive subject plays within our agency.

This new training model will organically be incorporated into the agency's standard operating procedures. New employees will still be required to attend Sexual Harassment and Workplace Violence training within 90 days of employment with SCDOT. This new training presents no changes to our current procedure for new employees. This new training model will present a change only for current staff that have already attended the training. They will be required to attend this modified training within 24 months of the new presentation outline.

Evaluation Method

The goal would be to develop an electronic test to evaluate the effectiveness of the revised Workplace Violence and Sexual Harassment training. The test results will be broken down by each district and specific areas of this training. This will identify where test scores are not meeting predetermined standards, not only based on the district but specific modules of the training. When unequal results are identified, this will help guide our conversations with the trainer to gain an understanding of why the scores are not consistent desired goals. Senior members of the Office of Human Resources will work to identify what score is considered passing for the training. The test will be housed in the Agency's Learning Manager System and will be used to monitor and measure the test results.

Summary and Recommendations

Throughout the course of this project, my goal was to identify and develop process improvements that would impact not only the Office of Human Resources but the entire Agency. It is the role of Human Resources to ensure our workforce is well educated on agency wide policies. With a workforce that seems to change daily, it is imperative that the agency recognize processes that will quickly immerse new staff into the culture of the agency and how to properly interpret policies and practices. This study has bought attention to the importance of the SCDOT finding ways to ensure the intended message is being effectively communicated to our intended audience. The SCDOT must determine the most effective way to relay this message to staff that seem to constantly experience high turnover without losing the message of the agency and its culture.

I recommend that we reevaluate the content of the Workplace Violence and Sexual Harassment training annually to ensure its effectiveness and relevancy. Workplace trends and information change almost daily, and we want to ensure that we are not communicating a message that is no longer applicable and valid to the workforce.

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