

Like second-hand smoke, racial discrimination at work can affect bystanders

blogs.lse.ac.uk/businessreview/2017/03/16/like-second-hand-smoke-racial-discrimination-at-work-can-affect-bystanders/

3/16/2017



The toxic effects of racism can extend well beyond the target. Our [research](#) reveals that, like second-hand smoke, the negative effects of racial discrimination at work can affect third-party bystanders. This is called ambient racial discrimination, and it includes a range of workplace experiences, such as directly witnessing racial discrimination aimed at others, hearing about racist incidents, seeing graffiti or nooses at work, and hearing racist jokes, comments and e-mails ([Chrobot-Mason, Ragins & Linnehan, 2013](#)).

Ambient racial discrimination is a workplace stressor. Our surveys of employees from a variety of organizations and occupations revealed its potent repercussions for employees of all races. Those exposed to racial discrimination in their workplace were more likely to report physical symptoms of stress at work, such as upset stomach, shortness of breath, heart palpitations, and hand tremors. They were also more likely to experience insomnia and had more stress-related absenteeism than those not exposed to ambient discrimination. Ambient discrimination also affected employees' organizational commitment; those who were exposed to racial discrimination at work reported less commitment than those not exposed. These findings illuminate the pernicious and potentially widespread effects of racism at work.

So what can organisations and managers do? Organisations clearly need to develop inclusive climates and eliminate workplace racism, but entrenched attitudes make this a challenge. Racism often emerges in subtle and sometimes even unintentional ways through jokes, comments or by forwarding "humorous" emails. Organisations can attempt to regulate behaviours, but employees may engage in racist behaviours without being fully aware of their racism or the repercussions of their words and actions.

Our research offers organisations another option: high-quality mentoring relationships. Mentors are individuals with advanced experience and knowledge who take a personal interest in helping the careers of younger, less experienced employees ([Kram, 1985](#)). Mentors offer many benefits to protégés: they may be role models who

sponsor and coach protégés, offer them guidance, help them advance in the organization, and promote their careers (Ragins & Kram, 2007). Our research revealed yet another important benefit: mentors can buffer employees from the negative effects of ambient racial discrimination.

We found support for this “mentor buffer effect” in two studies (Ragins et al., 2017). Our first study, a survey of 3,813 workers in the U.S., found that employees who were exposed to racial discrimination at work had lower organisational commitment than those not exposed, but those with high-quality mentoring relationships experienced less loss of commitment than those lacking mentors. Our second study of 557 U.S. workers found that mentors buffer by providing “holding behaviours” in their relationships. Holding behaviours provide an “arms-around experience” of support, care and affirmation (Kahn, 2001). The relationship becomes a safe haven where protégés can share their concerns and experiences without fear of judgment or retribution. The mentor validates and affirms their experiences, gives them support, and offers perspectives that may help them cope with stressful workplace experiences.

We found that supervisors and close workers also provided holding behaviours, but their holding behaviours were not effective; they were unable to buffer employees from the negative effects of ambient racial discrimination. This tells us that mentoring relationships are a very special and unique relationship. Close coworkers and managers simply can't take the place of a mentor.

Our study illustrates the importance of relationship quality. Mentoring relationships fall along a continuum of quality, and the greater the quality in the relationship, the more likely it was to buffer protégés from the adverse effects of a discriminatory workplace. In fact, even though formally assigned mentoring relationships are generally of lower quality than informally developed mentorships, we found that formal mentorships could buffer when they were high quality.

So how do we develop high-quality mentoring relationships? We first need to understand their unique experiences and processes (Ragins, 2016). High-quality mentorships do more than just coach or sponsor employees. They are close relationships characterized by trust, disclosure, and commitment. The relationship is a safe haven that fosters authenticity; members are accepted for who they are and they can bring their true selves to the relationship, without having to pretend to be someone else. Members know that their disclosures will be held in confidence and that their experiences will be accepted rather than judged. The relationship gives them a sense of psychological safety that buffers them from workplace stressors.

Mentors can improve the quality of their relationship by rejecting the “Yoda model of mentoring,” where the mentor assumes the position of the all-knowing teacher who fills the protégé with knowledge while remaining safely aloof and emotionally distant. Instead, the mentor steps down from the pedestal of power and recognizes that the relationship can be a two-way street for sharing, learning and personal growth. This shift in roles and the mentor's ability to be vulnerable creates a safe space that allows protégés to share their concerns, fears, and weaknesses, allowing them to be more authentic and moving the relationship to a deeper level of closeness, trust and commitment. These dynamic processes help mentoring relationships move along the quality continuum, from marginal to magnificent.

How can organizations help employees develop high-quality mentoring relationships? They can develop relational mentoring cultures by engaging in practices and programs that recognize, value and promote high-quality mentorships (Ragins, 2012, 2016). Mentors should be rewarded and receive training that helps them develop the skills needed for effective relationships, such as listening, empathic communication and perspective taking. Potential mentors and protégés can be provided with opportunities to interact and develop their relationship. Managers and leaders can model effective mentoring, publically recognize high quality mentorships, and ensure that mentors are recognized and rewarded for becoming mentors. Mentoring relationships take time, and organizations that rely on commissions or billable hours for compensation may unintentionally penalize mentors for developing their relationships.

Formal mentoring programs can be effective, but only if they are carefully designed. The goals and expectations of the program need to be clear and tailored to the needs of the participants. Members need to be carefully selected for their motivation and willingness to be the relationship. Mentors and protégés should be carefully matched, based on program goals and participants needs. They should receive training on what mentoring is (and isn't) and how to build a high-quality mentoring relationship. The program coordinator needs to monitor the relationship, provide support, and intervene if the relationship goes off track. Finally, the program should be rigorously evaluated, as this helps refine and improve the program. A high-quality formal mentoring program takes time and resources. But as with other things in life, you get what you pay for.

In sum, the toxic effects of workplace racism can affect bystanders of all races, but the presence of high-quality mentorships can buffer employees from the negative effects of racial discrimination at work. High-quality mentoring relationships are valuable not only for career and developmental purposes; they are also beneficial for buffering employees from the stress associated with a discriminatory workplace.

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Notes:

- *Professor Belle Rose Ragins will give a lecture on this topic on Wednesday 29th March, for the Centre for Research in Equality and Diversity at Queen Mary University of London. For information and to sign up, click [here](#)*
- *This blog post is based on the authors' paper [Anchoring Relationships at Work: High-Quality Mentors and Other Supportive Work Relationships as Buffers to Ambient Racial Discrimination](#), in the journal *Personnel Psychology*, Volume 70, Issue 1, Spring 2017, pp 211-256*
- *The post gives the views of its author, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics and Political Science.*
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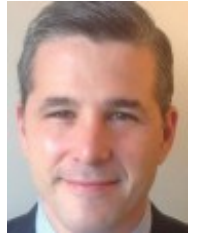
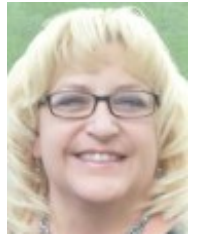
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