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Serious Play Training Scenario

Hacking the Toxic Workplace: Debug, Reboot, and Thrive



Module 1: Workplace Harassment & Unhealthy Behaviours

2023-1-CY02-KA220-YOU-000159744

Objective

To engage youth workers in a playful, creative and interactive experience where they become “ethical hackers” tasked with identifying and resolving the various types of workplace harassment and unhealthy behaviours. Through problem-solving, teamwork, and critical thinking, participants will explore strategies to improve company culture and eliminate toxic behaviours within a fast-growing tech company.

Duration

Approximately 3,5 hours

Materials Needed

- Escape room-style props (locked box, puzzle pieces, etc.)
- Markers
- Printed handouts (clues, character descriptions, case studies)
- Evaluation forms
- Timer
- Projector and screen for presentations (optional)

Participant Roles & Profiles

- **Youth Workers:** Individual responsible for the welfare and the training of young employees.
- **Young Employees:** Simulated roles played by some participants to represent the perspective of young workers.
- **Supervisors:** Participants acting as supervisors who oversee young employees and are responsible for ensuring workplace safety.
- **Human Resources (HR) Lead:** Participant tasked with identifying hazards and implementing safety measures within the simulated environment.

Scenario Outline

Introduction

The facilitator welcomes participants and provides an overview of the session. Participants are introduced into a tech company setting, where a toxic culture has negatively affected productivity and team morale. Their mission is to **Hack into the company's "toxic system"** by identifying bugs (representing harassment and unhealthy behaviours) and solving them through interactive puzzles. Once all the bugs are solved, they will **reboot the workplace culture**.



Icebreaker Activity: Chain Reaction

Participants write down one positive workplace behaviour (e.g., respect, collaboration, inclusion, support, etc.) on a sticky note. The facilitator asks a participant to start a chain by reading their workplace behaviour aloud (e.g., "Collaboration") and explaining how it can positively influence the next person's behaviour (e.g., "Collaboration leads to Inclusivity because it ensures everyone's voice is heard"). The next participant reads their behaviour aloud and connects it to the previous participant's behaviour. This process continues around the circle, creating a chain reaction of positive workplace behaviours that demonstrates how interconnected behaviours can influence workplace culture.

Goal: This activity sets the tone for teamwork, communication, and problem-solving during the session.

Scenario Setup:

A fast-growing tech firm is experiencing workplace issues such as harassment, exclusion, and unhealthy behaviours, which are negatively impacting productivity and morale. **Maya**, a junior developer, is subjected to dismissive and subtle, sexist comments from her senior colleague, **James**. James's behaviour has created a toxic environment with his inappropriate remarks. Meanwhile, **Tina**, the project lead in HR, has received several harassment complaints but is under pressure from management to avoid addressing them. **Alex**, a software architect, notices Maya's exclusion from important team activities and wants to help but is unsure how to intervene. **Samantha**, a senior developer, witnesses Maya's microaggressions and exclusion but feels unsure about stepping in to address the issues.

Distribution of Roles:

The facilitator assigns the following roles to the participants:

- **Maya:** A junior developer who is the target of dismissive comments from her senior colleague, James.
- **James:** A senior engineer whose belittling behaviour creates a toxic environment.
- **Tina:** A project lead in HR, under pressure to avoid addressing harassment complaints.
- **Alex:** A software architect who notices exclusionary behaviour but doesn't know how to intervene.
- **Samantha:** A senior developer who sees the issues but hesitates to get involved.

Once the roles are assigned, the facilitator introduces each bug scenario. Participants with roles present their situation to the rest of the group. After the role-play, all participants collaborate to solve the respective bug through interactive puzzles, while the facilitator manages the puzzle-solving time and leads the debrief discussion. After each puzzle, the facilitator asks debrief questions to reinforce key lessons, concluding the session with a collaborative system reboot plan that summarizes the outcomes.

Interactive Puzzles and Challenges:

Bug #1: The Overheard Comment

Maya overhears James making subtle, sexist comments about her appearance, which makes her feel uncomfortable. This behaviour is negatively affecting her productivity.

- **Puzzle Type:** Word Decryption (Substitution Cipher). The puzzle is designed to help participants identify **microaggressions** and understand how subtle forms of harassment can have **long-term negative effects** on workplace culture. Specifically, the participants must work together to **decrypt a message**, given by the facilitator, using a substitution cipher (A=1, B=2, etc.), which represents the microaggressions Maya is experiencing.
- **Encrypted Message:**
- 13-9-3-18-15-1-7-7-18-5-19-19-9-15-14-19 1-18-5 19-13-1-12-12 2-21-20 3-1-21-19-5 2-9-7 4-1-13-1-7-5
- (Decoded: “Microaggressions are small but cause big damage.”)

Debrief Questions:

- What are microaggressions, and why are they harmful?
- How can HR respond to such behaviours?
- What can be done to protect Maya and others?

Goal: Introduce participants to the concept of microaggressions and their subtle but harmful effects on workplace culture.



Bug #2: The Missing Link (Exclusion)

Alex notices that Maya is being excluded from important team meetings and social events, isolating her from critical discussions and decisions.

- **Puzzle Type:** The Inclusion Puzzle
 - The puzzle represents the team's dynamics.
 - Participants must assemble a workplace puzzle where key pieces are missing or incorrect. The missing pieces represent Maya's absence from important workplace activities, while the incorrect pieces symbolize unhealthy behaviours (e.g., cliques, favoritism) that need to be removed.
- **Instructions:**
 - **Participants work together to complete the puzzle, but they quickly realize that some pieces are missing or incorrect.**

Debrief Questions:

- How does exclusion affect team morale and productivity?
- How can exclusion occur subtly in the workplace?
- What strategies can prevent exclusion, even unintentionally?

Goal: Participants learn to identify **exclusionary behaviours** and propose inclusive solutions that foster healthier team dynamics.



Bug #3: The HR Dilemma Virus

Tina, the HR lead, feels pressured by the management to ignore harassment complaints, creating a toxic environment where issues are swept under the rug.

- **Puzzle Type:** Decrypting the Anti-Harassment Policy
 - This puzzle reflects the challenge of uncovering hidden or buried policies in a workplace where harassment complaints are not being handled appropriately.
 - Participants must search in the place, find and decrypt an “encrypted file” containing the company’s anti-harassment policy. The file is encoded using a simple substitution cipher (A=1, B=2, etc.).
- **Encrypted Message:** 3-15-14-6-9-4-5-14-20-9-1-12 18-5-16-15-18-20-9-14-7 (Decoded: “Confidential Reporting”). This encryption represents the **importance of confidentiality** in reporting harassment issues, something management is pressuring HR to ignore.

Debrief Questions:

- How should HR respond when pressured to ignore harassment claims?
- How can HR ensure confidentiality and a safe environment for reporting issues?

Goal: To highlight the importance of HR autonomy in handling harassment complaints and ensure confidential reporting is upheld despite management pressure.



Bug #4: The Bystander Ladder

Samantha has witnessed the exclusion and microaggressions but has remained a bystander, unsure of how to intervene.

- **Puzzle Type: Fill-in-the-Gap Ladder**
 - The puzzle represents the **different levels of action** that a bystander can take in a workplace situation involving harassment or exclusion.
 - Participants are given an image of a ladder with blanks on each rung, representing the escalating steps a bystander can take to address harassment. They must fill in the missing rungs in the correct order, using action cards, each representing a potential bystander intervention step ranging from least to most involved steps, thus building an **escalation strategy** for bystander intervention.
- **Example Ladder-Escalating Steps:**
 - Report to HR
 - Intervene in the Moment
 - Offer Support to the Victim
 - Observe and Gather Information

Debrief Questions:

- Which steps are easier for a bystander to take, and why?
- How can companies empower bystanders to act?

Goal: To empower participants to understand and take progressive bystander action, promoting a culture where everyone plays a role in addressing harassment.



Final Puzzle: The System Reboot

After solving all the previous puzzles, participants must now **reboot the company's culture** by agreeing on a comprehensive action plan to eliminate harassment and unhealthy behaviours.

- **Puzzle Type:** Group Decision-Making (Key to Escape) Participants must use what they have learned to create a "company reboot plan". Each participant shares one idea for improving the workplace, and the group must agree on a comprehensive solution. The plan must include a robust anti-harassment policy, a bystander empowerment program, and regular inclusion check-ins.

Once the participants agree on the solution, the facilitator gives them the key to unlock the final box, which contains a **symbolic reboot key** representing the healthier workplace culture they have created.

Goal: To have participants collaboratively design a **comprehensive workplace action plan** that addresses harassment, fosters inclusion, and prevents future toxic behaviours, symbolizing the creation of a healthier, more positive workplace culture.

Group Discussion & Debrief

After completing the scenario, the facilitator leads a reflective discussion.

Debrief Questions:

- What types of harassment and unhealthy behaviours did you identify in the scenarios?
- How did solving each puzzle help you think critically about workplace culture?
- Which puzzle did you find most challenging, and why?
- How can bystanders be empowered to act in a high-pressure, fast-moving workplace?
- What steps can HR take to ensure openness and transparency in reporting?
- How can these lessons be applied to your own workplace?

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