Maximizing the Power of Mentorship in Preventing Sexual Assault

Introduction

In order to effectively prevent sexual assault in your Wing, the current cultural norm of bystander inaction must be addressed. The success of your prevention efforts will depend in part on how effectively you mobilize those in your command to engage in more frequent bystander interventions when faced with potentially high-risk situations. A strong body of research about social networks and culture change, including the highly regarded *Diffusion of Innovations Theory* (Rogers, 1983), can guide your mobilization choices and your overall prevention efforts.

Why Mandatory Programming Alone Won't Work

Previous strategies have relied primarily on community-wide mandatory programming; it is becoming increasingly clear that this is not the best way to promote broad based cultural change. In fact, used in isolation, mandatory sexual awareness or bystander intervention training is not only inefficient in creating the desired change, but it is less effective as well. Wide-spread, mandatory education can be a useful way to disseminate basic information, yet it takes a more nuanced approach to create true culture change.

Changing Culture by Mentoring Early Adopters

Diffusion of Innovations Theory outlines an efficient way to change norms that can apply to your Wing. It is based on the premise that behavior change in a population is initiated by a core, influential group and then diffuses across the community. This happens when enough natural opinion leaders ("early adopters") within the population visibly model and endorse the new behavior. Early adopters are those individuals in a given sub-group who have the greatest amount of social influence and ability to persuade others.

Since caring about sexual violence and intervening in high-risk situations cannot be forced or mandated, any effective strategy will depend upon personal persuasion. In order to compel the early adopters in your Wing to endorse new behaviors of bystander action, your mentorship is vital. As a leader, share your commitment to violence prevention with key members (early adopters) of your command. It will then spread throughout your command as these early adopters model the new behavioral norms with their peers who will then be influenced to do the same.

Time is a scarce resource for Commanders and maximizing each opportunity for mentorship is imperative. As *Diffusion of Innovations Theory* indicates, all time with subordinates is not created equal. Since the early adopters within your Wing carry more influence than others, each one who models and endorses sexual violence prevention behaviors has an exponential impact at persuading others to do the same. Your time spent will be multiplied as the knowledge and values you pass on will be diffused to the rest of the population through the early adopters.

In an area as stigmatized and divisive as sexual violence, harnessing the natural process of change through modeling and peer influence within community sub-groups appears to be much more effective than attempting to force a new value from the outside.

Identifying Early Adopters

There are two easy ways to identify early adopters:

1. Ask members of each sub-population on your Wing to whom they go for advice and information about an idea, and then focus on those most often named. Questions asked can include: Who do you respect? Who do you seek advice from? Who leads the social scene in your group? Who is seen as a group leader?

2. Ask members of your leadership team who are in a position to directly observe the daily interactions of Airmen to identify early adopters. Questions asked can include: Who are the leaders in this system? Who is most popular? Who sets the social scene?

Caution

Incorrectly identifying early adopters can reduce the effectiveness of your mentorship time. There are two mistakes commonly made:

1. Individuals who are already committed to sexual violence prevention and already involved in the program may not necessarily be the ones who actually have social influence on the issue. They may, in fact, be perceived by the mainstream population as too closely aligned with the issue and therefore their opinions are dismissed.

2. Confusing "formal" leadership positions with early adopters can also reduce likelihood of success. Holding a title or formal position of power/leadership does not necessarily equate to having influence over peer opinions.

Next Steps

1. Utilize your leadership team to identify early adopters across various sub-groups in your Wing.
2. Schedule short face-to-face, informal meetings with early adopters.
3. Share specific values and behavioral expectations regarding sexual violence. Speak personally and make it "real."

References

Rogers, E. M. (1983). Diffusion of Innovations (3rd ed.). New York: Free Press.