Final Report:
Workplace Behavior (Bullying) Project Survey

December 2, 2008

Submitted by:

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RE: Final report for the Workplace Behavior (Bullying) Project

After extensive consultation with the campus community, involving on-site presentations and meetings with leadership and various stakeholder groups, a draft of this project report was circulated in August 2008—prior to your annual campus retreat. Over the next three months, we reviewed campus policies and procedures and solicited and collected feedback about, and reactions to, our findings and initial recommendations. We now offer our final report and recommendations on the Workplace Behavior (Bullying) Project.

Notes and Definitions

- Throughout this report, we make reference to the “Preliminary Report” (including all summary statistics) and “PowerPoint” presentation of survey results—which were presented during our May 2008 visit. Both of these documents (along with a copy of the Workplace Bullying Survey and summary handout) can be found on the “President's Commission on the Status of Women” web site, at the following URL: http://www.mnsu.edu/csw/workplacebullying/

- Unless we state otherwise, when presenting statistical data the subscript letter “n” represents the number of respondents associated with a particular percentage.

- Aggression refers to single or isolated instances of “negative” workplace behavior.

- Bullying refers to repeated and persistent patterns of “negative” workplace behavior that is ongoing for six months or longer in duration.

- For ease of presentation and interpretation, we refer to the “aggressor” or “initiator” of negative workplace behavior as the bully and the recipient or target of such behavior as the victim. However, it is important to note that we generally avoid using these terms in our own research and writings opting, instead, for less loaded terms such as “actor” and “target,” respectively.

- For some of the analyses presented in this report, reference will be made to the presence or absence of statistical significance—the extent to which the difference between two values is “real” or more likely due to chance or random error. In all instances in which significance tests are reported, we consider values to differ significantly if there is less than a 5-percent chance that the difference is due to chance or random error (i.e., p<.05).

- Primary Source of Aggression: For each of the 29 aggression/bullying items on our survey, respondents identified the extent to which they experienced each of those behaviors (never, once, a few times, several times, monthly, weekly, or daily) and actor who was most responsible for doing this to them (dean, chair, supervisor/manager, other administrator, coworker/colleague, subordinate, customer/client, other). If the respondent identified the same source of aggression 75% of the time, that actor (e.g., dean, chair, colleague/coworker, etc.) was identified as the “primary source of aggression” for that particular respondent. Using this conservative criterion (as opposed to a simple majority of greater than 50%) reduces the amount of usable data but provides a more accurate picture of the nature of relationship between bullies and victims—at least at the aggregate level of analysis.

- Rule of ten: We will not report data for groups/classes of individuals in which ten or fewer members of that group/class identified themselves in the demographic section of our survey.
Executive Summary

This document (a) details our major findings, (b) summarizes the feedback that we obtained from members of the campus community during, and subsequent to, our May 2008 visit, (c) discusses the follow-up analyses that we conducted in response to that feedback, and (d) provides a set of recommendations. We confine our observations and comments to key findings associated with the core purpose of our consulting activities—the diagnosis and management of workplace aggression and bullying, and closely related factors. Before proceeding, we wish to thank the many members of the campus community with whom we have met and worked over the past two years.

Highlights from our Statistical Findings

- Using the behavioral checklist on our survey (in which respondents check-off which of 29 aggressive behaviors they have experienced and the frequency of occurrence), 68% of our survey population (n=1185) experienced some form of aggression.
- Using this behavioral checklist, 23% were classified as victims of bullying.
- Using another measure of bullying, 32% of respondents self-identified themselves as being victims—after reading a definition of bullying (the reasons for the difference in prevalence rates is discussed in the report).
- Overall, 45% report some experience with bullying as a victim or a witness.
- With respect to witnessed bullying, 50% of the incidents were reported by individuals located in Academic Affairs, 19% Student Affairs, and 14% Finance and Administration.
- Much of the bullying on campus has been occurring for an extended period of time. 35% of the respondents reporting bullying say that it has been going on for more than 36 months.
- From our experience, there seems to be a surprising number of older employees reporting experiences with bullying—74% of these respondents are age 40 and older (n=222).
- Of those reporting experiences with bullying, 89% reported that they felt helpless to respond.
- Beyond aggression and bullying, 55% of our sample reported some experience with “negative” or “unpleasant” workplace behavior.
- 23% of our respondents indicated that they were dissatisfied with the university and 17% indicated they intended to leave the institution.
- Victims of bullying indicate that they experience negative effects on their emotional and physical health, feel more dissatisfied, more fearful, more stressed, less committed to institution, and report being more likely to transfer to another unit or leave the university.

Focal Issues for Action

- A climate exists in which many individuals fear reprisals for speaking-up or taking action. We believe that this issue is among the most serious causes and consequences of bullying on campus—one that will impede the implementation of any future interventions (including the “Great Place to Work” initiative).
- Although there are many well-articulated and carefully crafted university policies, there seems to be no system for tracking compliance with, or the effectiveness of, many of these procedures.
- The lack of a formal set of well-articulated and jointly-developed “core values” for the campus community and measures for evaluating the extent to which those values impact decision-making and action. This may also result in a sense among employees that there is no coherent commitment on the part of leadership to providing a healthy and respectful work environment.
- The lack of formal coaching/mentoring for leaders at all organizational levels. Beyond existing orientation and ongoing training programs for supervisors, there must be some mechanism for providing feedback about undesirable behavior to people in leadership positions and guidance to help leaders address these kinds of issues. This mechanism must be used for developmental (as opposed to disciplinary) purposes.
- Beyond personal coaching/mentoring, there must be a system for all employees to provide anonymous feedback about issues of concern. We are aware of the “Silent Witness” program and believe that this may be one useful mechanism—if it is expanded to include behaviors associated with bullying. However, the
“Silent Witness” program doesn’t allow for direct feedback to the complainant about the status of the complaint or resolution of the problem. We offer suggestions about a “Speak-Up” program designed to provide such feedback.

**Major Findings**

1. As detailed in our PowerPoint Presentation, 84% (n=807) of the individuals responding to the 29 aggression and bullying items on our questionnaire reported experiencing instances of aggression or bullying. This represents 68% of our entire survey population (n=1185). The vast majority of those reporting such experiences fall into the category of “occasional aggression” (61%, n=583). In terms of bullying, 12% (n=114) fall into the category of “some bullying” (1-2 events occurring weekly or daily) and 11% (n=110) would be considered “severely bullied” (i.e., experiencing 3 or more behaviors on a weekly or daily basis). In short, 23% (n=125) of those responding to these questions are directly “bullied,” according to well accepted definitions of that term. By “directly bullied” we refer to direct experience with bullying as a victim—as opposed to indirect bullying, in which individuals witness other people being bullied. As we will discuss later in this report, there are physical and psychological consequences associated with direct and indirect experiences with bullying. This becomes an important issue as 45% of our respondents reported exposure to bullying either directly or indirectly.

To put the “23%” in context, a review of many international studies of bullying reveals the following. When asked to reflect on experiences with bullying over “the preceding 6 months,” percentages range from 4% - 20%. When asked to consider the preceding 12 month period, percentages range from 27% - 38%. With respect to U.S. data, in a recent random survey of 7,740 individuals by the Workplace Bullying Institute and Zogby International (2007), 37% reported a direct experience with bullying and 12% reported witnessing such behavior. In our own research in U.S. organizations, we find direct experience with bullying to range from 34% - 37%.

As to the disparity in prevalence rates captured in the literature, this is due, in large part, to differences in survey methodology. European scholars have typically provided their respondents with definitions of bullying that highlight power differences (either real or imagined) between bullies and victims and then ask respondents to indicate whether or not they have been bullied. In essence, this involves respondents labeling themselves as victims (referred to as the “labeling approach”). U.S. researchers have tended to provide their respondents with a list of behaviors and asked them to indicate the extent to which they have personally experienced each of those behaviors (referred to as the “behavioral approach”). These different approaches tend to capture different prevalence rates for bullying. The data discussed in this section was derived using the behavioral approach but our survey also included the labeling approach, to be discussed later in this report.

2. In terms of respondents reporting that they have been subjected to bullying, the largest number identify themselves as faculty (n=104) followed by front-line staff (n=85), and director or department head (n=31). Since the number of respondents in each demographic group varies widely, it is important to view these data in proportional terms. As a percentage of respondents identifying themselves within each of the three groups mentioned above, the proportion reporting bullying was 39%, 42.5%, and 53%, respectively. In short, as a percentage of respondents in the particular demographic group, directors and department heads reported the most experience with bullying followed by front-line staff and then faculty. However, given the sample sizes for these three populations (n=58, n=200, and n=265, respectively), the percentages do not differ significantly (p>.05).

As our survey also involved student employees, we explored their experience with bullying. While representing 21% of our sample (n=202), 9% of our student employee respondents (n=19) reported experiences with bullying.
In reviewing these data, we conclude that bullying on campus is primarily (or largely) a faculty, staff, and administration issue.

3. We explored the relationships between “bullies” and “victims” to get a better sense of the dynamics on campus. As detailed in our Preliminary Report, since the largest percentage of bullying was reported among coworkers/colleagues—a typical finding in our research—we conducted an analysis in which “coworkers/colleagues” was the primary source of aggression for various demographic groups on campus (e.g., faculty, front-line staff, etc.). As a percentage of their representation in our survey, academic chairs reported the highest proportion of coworkers-colleagues as their primary source of aggression, followed by faculty, and front-line staff (refer to Figure 1 for more detailed results).

Next, we looked at supervisor/manager as the primary source of aggression to see if there is a hierarchical nature to the bullying. As you can see in Figure 2, the pattern that emerges is similar to that depicted in Figure 1. That is, individuals were equally likely to identify a coworker and superior as the source of aggression that they are experiencing.
Consistent with other data obtained in this project (discussed later in this report), victims of aggression and bullying frequently report multiple incidents emanating from multiple bullies. However, the analyses depicted in Figures 1 and 2 identify that some victims are primarily bullied by hierarchically different classes of bullies. For example, comparing Figures 1 and 2 we can see that 39% of faculty report coworkers/colleagues as bullies while 36% identify supervisor/manager. Similarly, 26% of front-line staff identifies coworkers/colleagues and 30% identifies supervisor/manager. Statistically, these percentages do not differ significantly.

4. Continuing with this line of reasoning, we next conducted a side-by-side analysis showing the primary source of aggression grouped by the respondents’ position at the university.

As clearly evidenced in Figure 3, for each job-related position captured on our survey, coworkers/colleagues represent the largest primary source of aggression—with three exceptions: (1) 1st line supervisors, (2) directors, department heads, deans, and (3) student employees. For 1st line supervisors, 5 respondents identified coworkers as their primary source and 6 respondents identified supervisors/managers. With respect to directors/department heads/deans, 6 respondents identified coworkers/colleagues and 7 identified other administrators. Finally, as relates to student employees, 22 identified coworkers/colleagues (presumably other students) and 32 identified supervisors/managers.

As noted in the introduction to this report, the primary source of aggression is a function of the respondent identifying a particular class of actor (chair, dean, colleague, etc.) in at least 75% of the aggressive encounters experienced. Consequently, this reduces the amount of data available for each analysis—hence the low number of incidents reported in this analysis. At the same time, it provides a useful picture of the bullying dynamic on campus.
These analyses would suggest that the experience of aggression and bullying on this campus is consistent with literature (and our own research) in this area. Specifically, aggression and bullying is both vertical (hierarchical) and horizontal (non-hierarchical) in nature.

In the next section, we discuss the experiences with bullying at the individual level of analysis—using both behavioral and labeling approaches.

5. Respondents were provided with the following definition of bullying:

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\text{All those repeated actions and practices that are directed to one or more workers, which are unwanted by the victim, which may be done deliberately or unconsciously, cause humiliation, offense, and distress, and that may interfere with job performance and/or cause an unpleasant working environment.}
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Based on this definition, 32% of our respondents “self-identified” themselves as victims of bullying and 41% indicated that they had witnessed this occurring against others. As a reminder, when using the “behavioral approach” to measuring bullying, 23% of our respondents were identified as victims of bullying.

The difference in rates of bullying based on the behavioral approach (23% in the survey sample) and on the labeling approach (32% of the sample) is worthy of comment. In a crosstabs analysis, comparing labeling and behavioral measures of bullying, we found that 52.5% of those respondents who self identify as being bullied are classified under the behavioral approach as experiencing “occasional aggression” (behavior occurring less than weekly). Consequently, the behavioral approach does not identify these respondents as being bullied. In looking more closely at these data, we noted interesting features of this group. Specifically, the respondents in this group (on average) showed higher mean aggression scores (greater overall mean frequency of
aggression) and an experience with a number of different hostile behaviors than those who had
not self identified themselves as being bullied, even though the behavioral approach classified
them as being exposed to “occasional aggression.” As the behavioral approach classifies
respondents on the basis of frequency of occurrence of events (i.e., one behavior at least weekly),
these results suggest that frequency of exposure is also influenced by the number of different
(discrete) behaviors such that it could be that at least every week one or another behavior is
occurring even though that specific behavior may occur less than weekly. Thus, at least weekly
exposure to some hostile behavior would be viewed as bullying.

One feature of bullying that is clear from the extant literature is that it is a process that starts out
slowly and becomes more overt and frequent. Thus, what we may be seeing in this category is
potentially the beginning of a bullying process. To the extent these explanations (frequency and
eyear stage) have validity; it suggests that the “occasional aggression” category could be an early
warning sign of conditions becoming ripe for escalation and provides an opportunity for action to
prevent bullying from becoming entrenched and to reduce the impact of what has already
occurred.

Finally, as relates to the measurement of bullying, we use both “behavioral” and “labeling”
approaches for a number of reasons. First, victims of bullying are often in a state of denial and
(for psychological and emotional reasons) less likely to “see” themselves as victims. In this case,
the behavioral approach typically reveals higher levels of aggression and bullying. Clearly, this
was not the case in our analyses, in which the behavioral approach resulted in a lower prevalence
rate for bullying. Second, for those people who do see and identify themselves as victims, the
subjective experience is quite different from those who are unable or unwilling to see,
acknowledge, and report legitimate instances of bullying. Finally, as noted above, it is our belief
that isolated and occasional exposure to aggression, captured by the behavioral approach, can and
often does lead to more severe instances of aggression and bullying.

6. As noted earlier, bullying involves persistent aggression lasting 6 months or longer in duration.
Respondents were asked to indicate the duration of bullying they had witnessed as well as for
bullying they had personally experienced. Figure 4 presents a side-by-side comparison of these
data. As can be seen, the largest percentage of responses to these questions reveals bullying
episodes more than 36 months (3 years) in duration—for both witnessed and personally
experienced aggression. The fact that the percentages for experienced bullying are higher
than for witnessed bullying is probably due to the fact that victims are more aware of their own
experiences than those of others.
7. As would be expected, Figure 5 shows that 1st line supervisors, Dir/Dept Head/Dean, Faculty, Mid-Level Mgrs, and front-line staff were significantly more likely than student employees or graduate/teaching assistants to experience bullying for 12 months or longer in duration. Clearly, regular employees are likely to have greater tenure at MSU than students; in fact, the correlation between tenure at MSU and duration of bullying is statistically reliable, \( r(296) = .36, p<.001 \). Too little data were available for academic chairs to include them in this analysis. These data lend further support to the findings that aggression and bullying are more likely to be associated with faculty, staff, and administrators—as opposed to student employees and also suggest systemic causes for the bullying being reported.

Note: Columns with different colors differ significantly, \( p<.05 \)

8. When asked to indicate whether or not they had reported experiencing “any negative or unpleasant behavior” on this survey, 55% (n=540) of our respondents said yes and 45% (n=449) said no. Obviously, negative and unpleasant events are (unfortunately) common in everyday experience. However, it is important to note that beyond systematic and persistent experiences with bullying, single, isolated, and occasional experiences with aggression contribute to a climate of anxiety, fear, dissatisfaction and, potentially, bullying. Related to this, 23% (n=257) of respondents indicated they were “dissatisfied with the university at this time,” 33% (n=390) felt that “in general, work is a source of stress,” and 47% (n=554) scored above the mean on our “climate of fear” scale. This scale included the following items:

a. In general, I feel at ease in this workplace because punishment is only applied to those who have done something wrong **

b. In general, I feel fearful or anxious when I am at work

c. In general, I feel safe discussing sensitive work issues with coworkers **

d. I dread repercussions at work because they are unpredictable

** These items were reverse-scored to ensure consistency across “positive” and “negative” responses. Higher mean response scores indicate a higher level of fear. Scale response varied from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree (6 = don’t know). We had 1177 valid responses for this scale (\( M = 2.44, \ SD = .97 \)).

It is important to note that this scale was included in our survey as a result of recurring themes that we heard during our initial campus visit (February 1-2, 2007). Specifically, on numerous occasions, people expressed that they were fearful about reprisals for “speaking-up.” Clearly, our survey data seems to support these contentions. We explore this matter later in our report.
9. Employee withdrawal behavior is known to be associated with dissatisfaction, and so we included a 3-item measure of intention to leave the organization or one’s job. This scale included the following items:

a. I often think about quitting.

b. I would like to leave my current position and transfer to another work unit at the university.

c. At the present time, I am considering leaving this university.

This measure used the same 5-point Likert-type scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree) mentioned earlier. We obtained 1130 valid responses to this scale ($M = 2.28$, $SD = .99$) and found that 48% ($n=544$) of our respondents expressed some intent to leave their job and/or university. We explore this matter later in the report.

**Feedback Obtained in Connection with Our May 2008 Campus Visit**

We were impressed by the level of engagement and information sharing shown by everyone during and after our May 2008 campus visit. We had excellent turnout at our public meetings, particularly the one scheduled on the second day (May 2$^{nd}$), attended by 75-80 people. Attendees praised leadership’s efforts to focus on workplace bullying and raised their concerns about what “real” difference this would mean in their daily lives on the campus. We also had several people take the opportunity to meet with us privately, onsite and via email/phone prior to and after our visit to discuss their current situations and thoughts on this imitative.

Before getting into specifics, we want to note that a very clear theme that we heard in all our conversations with employees was that they simply wanted “to be able to do {their} jobs,” followed by descriptions of how their negative workplace experiences were interfering with their ability to do just that. Having employees who like and want to do their jobs is every organization’s dream—a dream that might go unrealized in the wake of workplace bullying. Here are some specific issues that we identified in our interviews:

1. Both during and after our visit, we heard from several people in a variety of circumstances who were clearly looking to us for help in getting their grievances addressed. In some cases, this appeared to be due to their lack of clarity regarding where and to whom to speak. This highlights the need for campus-wide training and education, as suggested by unions and the President’s Commission on the Status of Women. In other cases, individuals seemed to lack confidence that their grievances would be addressed in a fair, adequate, and timely manner—based on their own experiences and their familiarity with the experiences of others.

2. People seemed to need help discerning whether or not what they were experiencing was unfair, unreasonable, or degrading and demeaning treatment (i.e., bullying) as opposed to acceptable instances of tough (but fair) management practices; e.g., addressing a performance issue; disciplining an employee; giving constructive feedback on behavioral issues; a conflict with a coworker or boss, etc. Discussions we had both during the visit and afterward suggest that in some cases the label of bullying was being used to describe very difficult situations that were painful but were not systematically unfair or examples of disrespectful treatment. In some situations, it appears that lack of clear and timely feedback from managers/supervisors complicated already challenging situations impacting job performance. In other situations, a poor job-person fit may be perceived as a deficit of the employee rather than as a structural or situational problem. In still other cases, it seems the complainant has been the source of distress and hostility rather than the procedure being used. In other words, it appears that how these difficult situations were handled rather than the issues themselves were the source of upset and fear. An excellent example of materials distinguishing between what is and is not harassment comes from Massachusetts Institute of Technology (2007)—see Appendix for MIT policy as well as material from other universities.

3. We noted that sometimes the manner and method used by employees to raise issues of bullying may also be problematic. For example, in surfacing these issues, victims may use language that is accusatory and
intensely emotional, thereby short-circuiting effective discussion. This might lead the victim and his/her manner of expression to become the focus of the responder’s attention, rather than the underlying issue itself. The MIT materials noted above include guidelines for raising complaints about harassment.

4. Even when victims are aware of appropriate university policies and complaint procedures, and sought help from relevant campus units, concern was expressed by a number of employees (both publicly and privately) that university practices are often inconsistent with university policies—both expressed and implied. For example, bullying supervisors are often promoted or rewarded as opposed to sanctioned for their behavior; responses to complaints exceed the 10-day timeframe specified in the university’s Employee Complaint Procedure—assuming they are addressed at all. As examples, we were provided with specific instances where procedures were followed and:

a. The situations had not visibly altered or any improvement was not sustained. We were told of situations where people had been spoken to about the behavior and things may have changed for a bit but returned, sometimes worse than before, after a time. In some cases, there was no discernible change in behavior at all. This experience left people with a sense that these behaviors, and the people exhibiting these behaviors, are simply not amenable to change, i.e., the victims believed they were simply going to have to live with it.

b. Either the response was delayed or the complainant was not kept apprised of the progress being made on their concern. This is an example of university practices being inconsistent with well-articulated and cogent policies (the Workplace Environment Policy and Employee Complaint Procedures). Such “slippage” allows the situation to fester and escalate and also reinforces a sense of helplessness—the belief that nothing will be done so why bother. Further, we heard from several different people that this also left them with the sense that “they do not matter”

These experiences may reflect a number of issues including any or all of the following:

1. Complaints are not being investigated.
2. If investigated, the complainant is not being kept apprised of the status and outcome of the investigation or any activities to address it;
3. Actions being undertaken to address the situation are not effective;
4. Appropriate actions have been taken and the complainant is not satisfied with them, i.e., they wanted some other action to happen.

To the best of our knowledge, no data have been collected, or are currently being collected, on the implementation of the WEP and ECP (e.g., number and type of complaints; outcomes of those complaint investigations). Thus, it is hard to evaluate which if any of these interpretations is accurate. Of critical importance, to the extent employees do not believe in university policies and their implementation, the institution loses the opportunity to improve the work environment as people will not bring forward their concerns and some may even use this as a justification for behaving as they choose.

5. There were questions raised regarding what is meant by “appropriate” conduct and the observation that this may have different meanings across groups and individuals. For example, the issue of faculty and the culture of vigorous intellectual debate may be perceived differently by other groups as confrontational and overly critical. This suggests the need for a campus-wide discussion to define and codify what is meant by respectful interactions in a working and learning environment. The notion of establishing or confirming a code of conduct or principles of conduct supportive of a respectful working and learning environment may be a way of framing this discussion. We discuss this in the suggestions for improvement section.
6. Related to this discussion, many employees, supervisors, and managers, have expressed a fear that they will not be given support by their superiors if they try to intercede and take action. In essence, they are afraid of putting themselves at risk; e.g., being “hung-out-to-dry” or putting themselves “out-on-a-limb.” We address this in more detail in a section on “climate of fear,” which follows later in our report. This element of fear is captured in the following e-mail, received from a university employee:

“Having you guys come in, take a survey, make a presentation, emphasize bullying on campus -- all that makes little sense if I end up without a job and people continue to be bullied. Just having someone tell me they believe me doesn’t change the reality of the situation.”

FOCAL ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Each of the items presented in this section represent what we believe are the most salient issues identified in our data analyses and numerous interactions with individuals and groups from the campus community, along with our recommendations for responding to these challenges.

Climate of Fear

In our initial campus meetings with several stakeholder groups, many individuals spoke about their “fear of reprisal” for raising concerns or “rocking-the-boat.” Many individuals expressed their concerns about sharing “sensitive information” and indicated that it might “come back to haunt them.” Also, as noted previously, we heard that individuals in managerial/supervisory positions are often afraid to take action because they believe (rightly or wrongly) that they will not receive support from their superiors. While the issues that were raised differed in detail and specifics across groups and individuals, the overarching theme of “fear” seemed evident.

As noted earlier in this report, based on our initial meetings and a series of subsequent unsolicited email messages and telephone calls from members of the campus community, we included the “climate of fear scale” in our survey. Overall, 15% (n=171) of those responding to “fear-related” questions said, “In general, I feel fearful or anxious when I am at work.” In addition, 21% (n=236) said “I dread repercussions at work because they are unpredictable.” Finally, 24% (n=280) disagreed with the statements, “In general, I feel at ease in this workplace because punishment is only applied to those who have done something wrong” and 27% (n=320) respondents disagreed with the statement, “In general, I feel safe discussing sensitive work issues with coworkers.”

Any intervention that we suggest will have limited utility if the fear issue is not adequately addressed. This is true for several reasons, some obvious and some subtle in nature. Beginning with the obvious, people are unlikely to make use of any process or practice if they feel they are putting themselves at risk. Second, fear leads to “rational” and “irrational” distrust of others—distrust based on unpleasant previous experiences (justifying suspicion and concern) and distrust based on a biased (paranoid) view of others, respectively (Kramer, 1994). Fear and distrust leads to a “sinister” or “hostile” attribution bias—where people assume malice on the part of others—leading to an increased likelihood of aggression and bullying. Third, fear and distrust creates stress and frustration, well-established causes of aggression and the increased occurrence of norm violations—leading to grievances and coercion (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). Fourth, fear and distrust results in general perceptions of unfair treatment—as individuals are more likely to see (and look for) injustices, both real and imagined. Decades of research on interpersonal aggression have established that perceived injustice is among the most powerful motivators of aggression. Finally, bullying often serves as a means to preempt anticipated (feared) attacks by others. In essence, fear may serve either as “cause” or “consequence” of aggression and bullying.

While it is impossible to eliminate all fear in the workplace, there is much that can be done to manage this disruptive emotion. Fortunately, successful “interventions” are consistent with the management of aggression
and bullying as well as the creation of a “great place to work.” Furthermore, an important element in the reduction of fear is procedural transparency—a principle, that we have been told, is important on this campus.

In essence, managing fear involves building trust—an individual’s willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the belief that the latter party is (a) competent, (b) open, (c) concerned, and (d) reliable (Mishra, 1996). In other words, one party believes that it will not be taken advantage of by another. Related to this is the concept of “organizational justice”—people’s perception of fairness (and all too frequently unfairness) on the job (Greenberg, 1987). As noted earlier, perceptions of unfair treatment are among the most powerful antecedents to, and consequences of, aggression and bullying.

We believe that the observations and recommendations outlined below can be used to address a number of issues revealed in our study and also provide a general framework for exploring new or existing data in order to design, implement, and evaluate a broad array of interventions on campus.

1. The university has already taken a very important first step in dealing with fear by openly collecting data on its prevalence and sharing these data with the campus community. This demonstrates leadership’s willingness to confront sensitive and often unflattering information. Every effort should be made to highlight this point in any and all presentations about this project or other such initiatives on campus. Often, fear is associated with “shooting the messenger.” People in leadership positions must encourage and not punish people for “speaking truth to power.” This is especially true for highly visible people in top leadership positions. Showing a lack of defensiveness in confronting unpleasant information is vital in demonstrating your seriousness and commitment to making MSU a “great place to work.” Identifying, discussing, and addressing what are typically “undiscussable” issues will go a long way in reducing the climate of fear and, at the same time, addressing perceptions that the organization lacks “follow-through”—the belief that nothing will change as a result of this initiative. This is a common complaint that we heard on campus and one that we encounter quite regularly in our consulting activities.

2. Related to the previous point, efforts must be made to create a “safe container” in which people can operate—an environment characterized by a high degree of interpersonal openness, honesty, and information in which participants engage in co-inquiry and feel free to surface, test, and challenge tacit assumptions underlying individual and group behavior. We refer to this environment as “collaborative social space” (Yorks, Neuman, Kowalski, & Kowalski, 2007). Within this environment, we encourage participative inquiry, decision-making, and action-taking, a process that we call “collaborative action inquiry.” In essence, this process involves the implementation of principles derived from “action science” and “organizational learning,” as typified in the work of Argyris and Schöen (1978; 1993) and Peter Senge (1990), respectively. Many practical suggestions and techniques for implementing this approach can be found in The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook (Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, & Smith, 1994) and specific examples of the application of these principles in addressing workplace aggression and bullying can be found in literature related to our work with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Workplace Stress and Aggression Project (see for example, Keashly & Neuman, 2004; Kowalski, Harmon, Yorks, & Kowalski, 2003; Neuman, 2004).

3. In essence, we recommend a process that involves individuals taking ownership of “their issues” and working participatively in collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data related to a set of focal issues. Working collaboratively, they endeavor to understand the nature of these issues, engineer strategies to collect more data if needed, and, eventually, design interventions to address these specific problems/challenges. As part of this approach, individuals are trained to surface untested assumptions driving their behavior, share previously “undiscussable” information, learn the difference between advocacy and inquiry, and create norms of behavior based on respectful interaction. This approach has proven useful in accomplishing the following. First, the collaborative nature of this process generates commitment as opposed to compliance. That is, by taking ownership for a set of issues, people are more likely to feel a
sense of engagement and commitment to solving those problems as compared to merely complying with formulaic fixes or unilateral organizational directives. Second, the extensive literature on organizational change demonstrates that active participation reduces anxiety, fear, and stress by reducing ambiguity, uncertainty, and insecurity. Third, the continual testing of assumptions against “hard data” accomplishes three very important objectives. It (a) reduces ambiguity and uncertainty (which is a well known cause of fear), (b) provides for openness and procedural transparency and (c) reduces the likelihood that people will misattribute the motives of others to malice, even in the absence of malevolent intent (a well known antecedent to aggression and bullying). More detailed information about this process and related training can be found in the Appendix to this report.

4. The baseline data collected in our survey, and the additional qualitative data collected in our on-going conversations with the campus community, reveals the presence of the following forms of fear (described earlier). First, there seems to be a general sense of anxiety and fearfulness that is best described as diffuse in nature. Second, many individuals describe a fear of discussing sensitive work issues with coworkers as well as a sense of dread associated with repercussions at work because these repercussions are perceived as unpredictable. Finally, a common perception expressed in the survey and in face-to-face conversations involves a fear of retaliation for raising issues or “rocking the boat.” While these data are instructive and provide a baseline for future interventions, we strongly recommend that additional data be collected to identify, more specifically, what people fear. This could involve short surveys that target specific issues, individual interviews, focus group sessions, or, more practically, some mechanism for obtaining anonymous feedback on a continuing basis. Some organizations employ suggestions boxes, anonymous web-based feedback, or “speak-up” programs. In the case of the “speak-up program,” some trusted third-party (the speak-up officer) receives feedback, comments, or a complaint from an employee, removes any information that might identify that individual, places a code number on the speak-up form and forwards it to a person best situated to respond; or, someone designated to handle such issues. The response to the “speak-up” is then returned to the “speak-up officer” who (by means of the code number, previously assigned) routes the response to the employee who initiated the action. Obviously, whatever process you choose would have to be consistent with existing collective bargaining or contractual agreements and be perceived as reliable and confidential. We are aware that there is the “Silent Witness Report” through Security that is focused on crime and fraud, which may be a mechanism that could be re-tooled or enhanced for providing information on mistreatment. Alternatively, there are well respected private organizations that offer related services. Whatever process you choose, some form of anonymous feedback and action mechanism is important. We discuss this in more detail in the Appendix.

5. Beyond the obvious use of data collection in uncovering and addressing important issues, communications serves as both a direct and indirect means of reducing fear. First, fear is more likely to grow in the absence of information—nature (including human nature) truly abhors a vacuum. In the absence of information, people will fill-in-the-blanks and this often includes the perception of a worst case scenario. Second, as demonstrated in a substantial amount of literature in the area of organizational justice, people must be given a “voice” in organizational affairs and that voice must be heard. An effective “speak-up” program (as described above) will provide for voice and actions flowing from the system will serve to “close-the-loop,” demonstrating that people in the organization really care. In our experience, we find that employees don’t necessarily expect total satisfaction in response to every complaint but they do expect fair treatment—to really be heard and considered. Years of research in procedural justice demonstrate that people may not be happy with a poor outcome but they are less likely to be angry if they believe that they were treated fairly. Again, such a process builds trust and reduces fear. One of the complaints that we heard on a number of occasions was that some complaints seem to “fall into a black hole,” never to be heard from again. In these instances, employees told us that they were angry about the process—not the outcome. They viewed the lack of a response as dismissing the validity of their concerns.
6. As relates to responding to a complaint, your employee complaint procedures stipulates that “Supervisors will try to resolve the complaint within 10 working days” ([http://www.mnsu.edu/humanres/policy/employeecomplaintpolicy_procedure2005.pdf](http://www.mnsu.edu/humanres/policy/employeecomplaintpolicy_procedure2005.pdf)). However, we are unaware of a mechanism to ensure that this occurs. In fact, we do not see a mechanism in place to track data related to the effectiveness of your Workplace Environment Policy or Employee Complaint Procedures. Operating under the business maxim that “what gets measured gets done,” we believe that a major effort should be made to create a mechanism for tracking such data across individuals and across units. For the purpose of the present discussion, this would involve the tracking of data related to the Workplace Environment Policy and Employee Complaint Procedures. However, data should be captured and tracked for all issues that the university has identified as being important (especially when they are codified in official university policies). In addition to simply capturing data associated with single issues, mechanisms should be created to track data across departments and units. For example, employee complaints may involve issues addressed by human resources, affirmative action, academic affairs, and the president’s office. How does one know when issues are resolved when multiple offices are involved—especially when confidentiality is important? As expressed by an employee in one of our interviews, “when more than one unit is involved, there is no way to ensure that the issue doesn’t fall between the cracks.” We revisit this issue in the discussion of policies and procedures that follows.

7. Obviously, fear may come as a legitimate result of bullying. Who wouldn’t be fearful when exposed to abusive, threatening, and demeaning behavior? Many of the complaints that we got about specific instances of bullying made it clear that the victims of such behavior were extremely fearful and anxious and felt a sense of complete helplessness. A common theme in many of these conversations involved victims agonizing over why this was happening and lamenting over-and-over that they simply wanted to “do their jobs.” We provide some suggestions on dealing with this in the next section related to workplace bullying policies and practices.

**MSU Policies and Procedures**

MSU developed and implemented the Workplace Environment Policy (WEP) and its accompanying Employee Complaint Procedure (ECP) in August 2005. This policy and procedure were designed to support and make manifest the commitment of the university to “civil behavior; mutual respect and to maintaining a workplace environment that is free from all acts or threats of violence or harassment” (Workplace Environment Policy, pg 1).

We examined the policy from two perspectives. First, we looked to see whether or not it contained “essential elements,” of an effective policy, as suggested by the literature on workplace bullying (see Rayner, Hoel, & Cooper, 2002). Second, we reviewed survey respondents’ assessment of the effectiveness of various MSU policies and procedures.

*In terms of essential elements, the WEP and ECP are strong in terms of:*

1. providing a statement of the university’s view and commitment;
2. the provision of clear definitions of core terms of workplace violence and general harassment;
3. requiring compliance with relevant polices such as state government zero tolerance of violence;
4. describing the scope of policy relative to other policies, specifically, MnSCU Policy 1B.1 regarding harassment based on membership in a protected class;
5. articulating to whom the policy applies and their responsibilities under the policy in terms of behavior and encouragement to seek assistance and report incidents;
6. specifying the role and responsibility of “supervisors, managers, directors, deans, and other administrators” to report and respond to all complaints and within specified timeframes and in writing;
7. describing processes and procedures of raising concerns with particular focus on utilizing the supervisory chain of command. Of particular note in the ECP is the identification of to whom one should bring a concern when the issue is with the person’s immediate supervisor.
8. identifying units where a complainant may seek assistance, (specifically HR, which would then refer to other resources as needed);
9. providing a description of the range of consequences/sanctions when the complaint is found to be warranted; and,
10. an explicit prohibition against retaliation and clear description of what would be considered to be a retaliatory action.

What was not clearly articulated or addressed in the WEP itself are the details or processes of how the policy and its accompanying procedure are to be monitored and audited. In our early meetings with the campus community, we were told that no data were collected on the policy as the focus was to be on most of the issues being resolved at the first supervisory level. This was apparently a consensus of all groups involved in the process of policy development, including the unions. The challenge this poses is as noted above it is not clear whether the policy is being implemented as envisioned, i.e., are supervisors and higher-ups responding as expected? Are timelines being enforced and written responses being provided? What types of issues are most common on campus? Have complainants filed any appeals? Why? Are people bringing forward their concerns? These data are not only useful for assessing the effectiveness of the policy but are also vital in helping the university identify what approaches seem to work and which ones seem to be ineffective or harmful. These data are also evidence to the campus community that their concerns are being heard and actions are being taken.

Interesting to us is that according to the MSU Self-Study report for NCA Accreditation Site visit in 2006, data and records are kept on complaints brought by students under the Office of Student Rights and Responsibilities, both formal and informal. Also, the Affirmative Action Office according to this report also keeps track of nature of issue, status of concerns, actions taken and decisions made. Thus, there are mechanisms on campus for capturing such data, which could be useful in the design of data collection and record keeping for the WEP and ECP.

In addition to specific content and focus, a policy’s success is directly linked to whether people covered by the policy are aware of it and know how to use it, which requires education and training. We note that the campus policies and procedures are presented as part of the new employee online orientation program as well as being contained in the current employee handbook. Further, we see that such material is part of the Supervisory Toolkit. Thus, mechanisms to increase exposure, and presumably awareness, are in place. We think it is important to make a distinction between “awareness” and “understanding.” In the survey, the majority of respondents indicated that they agreed that the policy had been communicated to all employees and that employees were generally aware of the policy. There was more disagreement though on the adequacy of training though on the adequacy of training in the policy. In terms of “how to use” WEP and ECP, it is unclear to us from our review of materials provided as to whether training materials go beyond description to include the illustration of the types of behaviors that are prohibited by the WEP (e.g., scenarios) as well as opportunities to develop skills in assessing situations and ways of responding, e.g., through the use of role-play or other “hands-on” experiential exercises. Such training clearly is important for supervisors and other higher ups who will be the “responders.” These individuals will be required to undertake an investigation. We note that there have been training sessions provided through HR on discipline and investigation. (e.g. Feb 27, 2007). It is not clear however, how widely known these procedures are to the campus at large. Knowing that there is a specified and detailed investigative process and what it involves may help assuage some of the concerns that employees have expressed that there are no fair and reasonable processes for investigating their concerns. It is important that investigation processes be articulated and widely known for WEP and ECP and that training be developed to ensure the integrity and fairness of the process. Rayner, Hoel, and Cooper (2002) provide suggestions on issues to be considered in an investigative process into bullying and harassment. For example, they note:
1. Frequently, the core of a complaint about bullying involves a set of experiences which, when taken separately, may seem rather innocuous but when put together form a pattern of consistent undermining behavior. Thus, investigators need to have solid investigative training and skills.

2. It is important to broaden the information-gathering process to people other than those directly involved in the complaint—that is, witnesses beyond the bully and victim.

3. Suspension of judgment until all relevant data are gathered.

4. Rapid yet reasonable timeframe.

5. Mechanisms must be instituted to ensure confidentiality and fair process.

6. Provisions for informing complainants and respondents of the progress on the complaint while ensuring due process and confidentiality.

7. Procedures must address what to do with parties during the investigation process; e.g., separate the parties? Suspend with pay?

Training would also be important for all members of the campus in terms of helping them understand what constitutes harassment/bullying and what does not; e.g., distinguishing between unfair and demeaning treatment and legitimate and appropriate exercise of authority or provision of constructive feedback on performance or behavior (for example, see University of Manitoba, 2004) as well as providing them with opportunities and strategies to address these behaviors before they become entrenched. MSU has developed similar types of training for the management of disruptive classroom behavior (see http://www.mnsu.edu/conduct/disrupbehav.pdf). We will discuss this further in the suggestions for improvement section and the Appendix.

While the policy is clear on the formal procedures for raising and addressing harassment and violence, it is relatively silent on identification of more informal mechanisms. Rayner, Hoel and Cooper (2002) in their work on responses to workplace bullying and the literature on dispute resolution system design in organizations (Brett, Goldberg, & Ury, 1990; Coltri, 2004) emphasize the importance of informal mechanisms such as opportunities for informal consultation that do not require laying a formal complaint. Such informal consultation could involve HR and other units such as AAO, Commission on the Status of Women, unions and other units identified in the survey. At MSU, informal consultation is offered by some units regarding concerns of conduct or other issues such as the Office of Student Rights and Responsibilities and the AAO. It could also involve the development of an informal or peer advisor network. Advisors would be recruited from the campus at large and trained in the various policies, procedures and other mechanisms as well as communication and basic counseling skills to support individuals in their decision making and possibly coaching them in responding to the actor. They would provide information regarding options available to them as well as being a “listening ear.”

**Suggestions for improvement**

1. In our review of various materials (including policies and presentations), it is apparent to us that the leadership of MSU (management and labor) is articulating a commitment to have a respectful and healthy work and learning environment. For example, the following goal is articulated in the University Mission statement. “The University will foster an actively engaged and inclusive learning community based upon civility, trust, integrity, respect, and diversity in a safe, welcoming physical environment.” (http://www.mnsu.edu/supersite/about/mission.html). References to a commitment to respectful and civil interaction also show up in the Strategic Priorities of Promote Diversity (priority 2) and Creating a Campus Culture of Wellness (priority 7) as well as the Student Statement of Responsibilities (http://www.mnsu.edu/conduct/pdfs/2008-2009-ssr.pdf). Respectful relationships is a theme that runs through the activities being undertaken (e.g., supervisory training, Leadership Institute, Professional Development Activities, Great Place to Work Initiative) In addition, developing and maintaining positive working relationships is a key dimension in performance evaluation for MSUAASF, Classified Employees and Excluded Administrators bargaining units. Finally, University Advancement explicitly articulates a set
of core values regarding respect, civility, and integrity ([http://www.mnsu.edu/advance/values.html](http://www.mnsu.edu/advance/values.html)). What is interesting is that there is no formal statement of core values at the university level articulating this.

In our first visit to campus in February 2007, MSU administrators raised the issue of a core values statement as an important step. Such statements publicly commit the institution and provide the framework by which all activities and accomplishments are guided and assessed. Campus-wide discussions of these values, a statement formally articulating them, and well articulated means of measuring the extent to which people act on those values would be an important next step in the University’s visioning. As an illustration, some academic institutions have moved to articulate a core value of an inclusive campus community in which the dignity of every individual is respected (e.g., Syracuse University, n.d.; University of Michigan, 2006). Articulating that this value requires fostering a respectful and civil climate on campus, these institutions explicitly and visually connect the various units, resources and policies/procedures that are relevant to the establishment of such an environment and make this easily accessible on their website for both campus members and the broader community. Such an articulation of values and resources and activities would be evidence for campus members of MSU’s commitment to and capacity for developing a respectful learning and work environment.

As part of this discussion, we would raise the question of considering a code or principles of conduct or statement of professionalism for the campus. At present, MSU, like other institutions, has a code of conduct for students. While we realize the idea of formulating a code of conduct that would encompass such a diverse group of faculty and staff may feel intimidating and controversial, other institutions have taken on this challenge (for examples, see Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1997; University of Calgary, n.d.). Further, there are models available on the MSU campus in the form of codes of ethics, within many professional disciplines, that speak to the issues of harassment discussed here. Additional resources are included in the Appendix.

2. It is important to articulate the responsibility of campus members when they witness behaviors described in the WEP. As we shared in our site visit on May 1-2, 2008, a notable proportion of survey respondents indicated they had witnessed other employees being harassed or bullied. Would they be able to raise what they saw with superiors? Would they be able to seek the assistance of HR or other units in addressing the situation? As an example, Victoria University (n.d.) in Australia explicitly addresses witness responsibilities in their policy on bullying Thus, we would suggest that the WEP include a statement regarding responsibilities of campus members when they witness such behavior and that the ECP include discussion of avenues available for responding and reporting.

3. As noted in the discussion on “climate of fear,” and the discussion above of core values framework, there is a critical need for identification and coordination among related policies/procedures and the units responsible for their implementation. Beyond MnSCU 1B.1, what are the connections to other policies and procedures on campus? For example, we noted that MnSCU Board Policy 5.22.1 “Acceptable Use of Computers and Information Technology” prohibits “harassment, threats to or defamation of others; stalking, and/or illegal discrimination.” MnSCU Board Policy 1C2 “Fraudulent & other Dishonest Acts” covers conduct such as “willful violations of laws, regulations or policies.” In addition, AFSCME has its own policy regarding “general harassment.” There is also the “Silent Witness Report,” under the auspices of Security that has an explicit focus on crime and fraud. Does it ever receive information regarding bullying and harassment? It seems important to make explicit the connections among these policies and procedures as information regarding bullying and harassment may come to the units that oversee these mechanisms. This then raises the question of how such information is shared among these units, and whether there is follow-up and continued connection between these units in terms of the ultimate resolution of the situation, i.e., coordination of response. A major concern is to ensure that concerns that are raised do not “fall between the cracks.” Based on some conversations that we have had, we understand that a meeting was to be
convened in early November among these and other units to look at this process of sharing information and following up on complaints. We strongly encourage this important initiative.

Given the number of campus units involved, the numerous procedures, and the mix of formal and informal procedures that exist for dealing with a wide array of behavioral issues, it is important to clarify the scope of responsibilities for each unit and the issues addressed by each policy or procedure and make this information easily accessible to campus members. MSU currently has a model of this articulation in the Resolution of Student Complaints policy in which issues covered under the policy are described and the primary or lead unit is identified. In addition, it would be important to develop a coordinating mechanism among these units that would provide oversight in order to ensure that once an issue is raised, it is treated seriously and addressed and resolved to the extent possible. MSU currently has examples of such coordinating mechanisms with the Diversity Commission and the Wellness Committee as specified in the Strategic Priorities.

4. As suggested in our evaluation of the WEP and ECP, there needs to be an articulation of more informal processes that can be utilized in gathering information about concerns and addressing concerns of harassment and bullying. We spoke earlier about the importance of training for individuals as targets, witnesses and actors in skills to address such behaviors as early as possible. Further, the data from the survey suggest that people tend to go to coworkers and family and friends for support and advice. While it is not possible for the university to reach out to family and friends, it is possible to reach out to employees and develop skills as informal or peer advisors, which is a model that has been used in other universities (e.g., Purdue University, 2008). The advisors would be thoroughly trained in all relevant procedures and basic communication skills. They would provide a “listening ear” and identify various options that the person could pursue. While this is also what HR and other formal units can and may do, it is clear that people do not always go to formal units and it is not clear that staff in those units possess the skills necessary in dealing with workplace bullying.

5. Another mechanism concerns facilitating reporting of incidents. While the policy encourages individuals to seek assistance and report harassment and is strong on prohibiting retaliation (at least on paper), people may still be reluctant to report incidents, particularly if the actor is in an organizationally superior position to them. In fact, we have heard many accounts of people that are reluctant to come forward due to fear of reprisals as well as supervisors who are afraid to tackle an issue because they fear they will get no support from their superiors. As noted earlier, we are aware of the Silent Witness Report system available through MSU Security. It would be useful to consider the value of a similar anonymous system with respect to harassment and bullying, as discussed in the “Climate of Fear” section of this report and in the Appendix that follows.
This section contains additional information, supporting documentation, and references to additional resources related to: (1) The Collaborative Action Inquiry/Evidence-Based Management Process, (2) “Speak-Up” and related programs, (3) the Coaching/Mentoring process, and (4) Workplace Bullying, Harassment, and Respect Workplace Environment policies and practices.

**Collaborative Action Inquiry: Evidence-Based Management (EBM)**

The Workplace Bullying Project Survey was an important first step in collecting baseline data about bullying on campus and we believe that our report has identified many issues and possible points of intervention. As we have noted, addressing the climate of fear is essential to the success of any intervention. At its core, this involves a major change initiative and decades of research on such interventions demonstrate the importance of employee participation in the process. Broad participation is important for many reasons. It helps reduce resistance to change by providing individuals some sense of control, promotes the consideration of an array of ideas and perspectives, and increases commitment to the process and use of the results. These are some of the many benefits associated with participative decision-making. With respect to the focal issues addressed in this report, a truly participative problem-solving approach should reduce fear and build trust.

As we explained in our initial and follow-up campus visits, we employ such a collaborative approach in our own consulting activities. This means that working jointly with you, we collect and analyze data, broadly share the results of our data analyses, obtain feedback from the campus community as to the validity and comprehensiveness of the data and participatively work to make sense of the data and formulate strategies for action. Put another way, this is a “sense-making and action-taking” process. If we have established a degree of trust with you (and we believe we have), this is a small demonstration of the power of this process.

While our involvement in this consulting project concludes with a set of formal recommendations, this is an iterative process that should continue over time—with or without our involvement. At the core of this participative process is an “evidence-based management” (EBM) approach that can (and should) be applied to organizational decision-making in general, not just workplace bullying issues (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006; Rousseau, 2006). As relates to EBM, data are continually collected about important organizational issues, those that the university has identified as central to its mission or various stakeholders have identified as important in meeting university, departmental, and work-unit objectives. For example, as you are presently engaged in the Great Place to Work initiative, you would begin by identifying what you mean by a “great place to work” at the university level and within specific work groups/units. If you decide that respect and civility are important components of your definition you would then proceed to identify what this means to people and how it would be manifested and measured throughout the organization. One of our clients identified respect, cooperation, conflict management, empathy, coworker support, non-discrimination, and diversity as important norms of behavior. After conducting a number of sense-making discussions with important stakeholders about the meaning of these behaviors in practical terms, precise definitions were developed along with an 8-item scale to monitor progress on initiatives designed to promote, reinforce, and sustain these behaviors:

1. People treat each other with respect in my work group.
2. A spirit of cooperation and teamwork exists in my work group.
3. Disputes or conflicts are resolved fairly in my work group.
4. The people I work with take a personal interest in me.
5. The people I work with can be relied on when I need help.
6. This organization does not tolerate discrimination.
7. Differences among individuals are respected and valued in my work group.
8. Managers/supervisors/team leaders work well with employees of different backgrounds in my work group.
In surfacing these issues, the organization held focus groups, town hall meetings, individual interviews, and solicited feedback with highly focused questionnaires. Regardless the data collection method employed, every effort was made to be inclusive in recruiting and selecting participants as well as highly visible strategies designed to provide employees with a real voice in the process. To “close-the-loop,” employees were (and continue to be) given feedback (data) about progress toward their objectives. This is an important step in demonstrating to people that their input really can make a difference. This is a missing element in many well-intentioned management programs. Finally, performance measures have been taken throughout this process to measure the “bottom-line” impact of a respectful work environment on organizational performance. In the case of our client, this involved the measurement of the quality and timeliness in the delivery of services. These data, too, were shared with employees.

It is important to note the place of organizational “benchmarking” in this process. When tackling various organizational problems, it is certainly useful to review “best practices” in comparable organizations. The key word is ‘comparable.’ EBM and participative decision-making emphasizes the need to test any and all assumptions within the context of your own organizational reality. That is, you need to assess the applicability of any approach within your own particular context. This might involve small pilot projects within the university.

We have used a collaborative action inquiry (EBM-based) approach in many different settings. As an example, we have used this in our extensive work with the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), which has been well documented (Keashly & Neuman, 2004; Kowalski et al., 2003; Neuman, 2004). As relates to the climate of fear issue, a recently published article in the Journal of Applied Behavioral Science provides specific details about the creation and maintenance of a “safe container” (Yorks et al., 2007). This article describes the experience of our action research project team in creating and sustaining the kind of collaborative social space that many theorists contend is needed for the generation of organizational learning and change. The very essence of this approach is the development of an environment in which people feel secure in surfacing their views without fear of disapproval or attack. This article describes, in great detail, how to create such an environment and how the process used in developing and maintaining this climate encourages respectful interactions and discourages interpersonal aggression and bullying. Rather than detail the recommendations made in that manuscript, we are appending a copy of that article to this report. In terms of highlighting the major points of that process, it involves the following:

- The process is designed to change the nature of the conversations/interactions that people have with each other throughout the organization.
- It provides mechanisms whereby people are taught to surface and test their hidden assumptions.
- It promotes a sense of fair treatment by focusing on social and structural forms of interpersonal justice. With regard to structural elements, this includes policies/practices and procedures (within groups, work-units, and across organizational boundaries) that:
  - Avoid or suppress bias;
  - Create consistent and fair allocations;
  - Rely on accurate information (EBM);
  - Are correctable;
  - Represent the concerns of all recipients; and,
  - Are based on prevailing moral and ethical standards.
- As relates to social factors, this includes:
  - Courtesy and deference;
  - Empathic communications;
  - Accounts and explanations;
  - Apologies
  - The provision of sufficient information.
Our process integrates these well-established social justice elements within teams, in day-to-day employee interactions, and as codified in the formulation and execution of organizational policies. The readings cited in this Appendix are meant to provide you with resources that you can use in translating our recommendations into action. We believe that you have many additional resources available on your campus—especially in the form of professional expertise in group dynamics, conflict management, team-building, evidence-based management, and participative decision-making. For example, it is clear from the Leadership Institute topics and the harassment investigation trainings developed and implemented by the HR department that there are staff on campus with such knowledge and expertise. Further, the Minnesota State Employee Assistance Program provides both individual and organizational resources and services that include many of these skill and knowledge domains (http://www.doer.state.mn.us/eap/eap.htm). If you would like to hear more from us on any of these issues, or if you would like us to make another campus visit to provide more in-depth coverage of any of this material, we would be open to such a discussion. Obviously, there are limits as to the detail or guidance we can provide within this report.

The collection of real-time data is central to the EBM process and critical to the development of trust (and elimination of fear) on campus. We now turn our attention to some mechanisms to achieve those ends.

**Speak-up Programs**

Currently, the university has a “silent witness report” that allows individuals to anonymously report incidents related to crime, rape, drugs, assault, theft, and vandalism. The web page also provides individuals with a way to report “other” types of incidents, along with their descriptions as to where the incident(s) occurred, individuals involved or who have knowledge of the incident(s), a description of the incident in as much detail as possible, and the opportunity to provide or withhold one’s name.

While this program provides an important mechanism for individuals to provide information anonymously, we would suggest that it be expanded to explicitly include behavioral incidents associated with bullying. More importantly, we believe that a mechanism should exist for two-way anonymous communication.

Many organizations (including IBM, Pepsico, New York Power Authority, and a number of healthcare organizations) have developed and implemented anonymous speak-up programs that promote two-way communication with the originator of a complaint (the complainant). This is especially important given that many people on campus complained about problems “falling-through-the-cracks.” One-way anonymous complaint procedures may not afford complainants feedback about what is being done—what actions, if any, are being taken in response to the complaint. By their very nature, two-way complaint procedures increase the likelihood that actions will be taken, as a response to the complainant is required within a predetermined period of time. Very importantly, they allow the organization to ask follow-up questions while still protecting the identity of the complainant.

In terms of the mechanics of such programs, in the past, some organizations have identified a “speak-up officer” (usually a third-party outside the organization) and provided their employees with a postage-paid envelope, containing a complaint form. If the complainant wants a response to the complaint, he/she inserts his/her name and address on the top section of the form—which is removable (along a perforated tab). After being received, the speak-up officer removes the tab (identifying information) and assigns a case number to the complaint. The complaint is then forwarded to the appropriate party/agency and when a response arrives, the speak-up officer forwards the response to the complainant. Some organizations provide a toll free telephone number and simply handle that call—and any future follow-up calls—via an assigned case number. In this case, no personal identifying information is required and the complainant is told to call back using his/her case number, after a preset time interval. More recently, some vendors have specialized in providing such third-party speak-up
services over the Internet. In fact, one such organization, EthicsPoint, has an existing affiliation with the University of Minnesota. Reports can be filed via a toll free hotline at 866-294-8680 or online at:


We are not making specific recommendations on a service but merely bring this particular site to your attention as they have an existing relationship with an academic institution in your state.

Here are some examples of other on-line vendors:

ClearView Connects
https://www.clearviewconnects.com/home

Anglo American Corporation

Peopleintouch
http://www.peopleintouch.eu/docs/InTouchBro.pdf

Some companies, like IBM, have developed their own in-house speak-up programs using software that assures anonymity and provides complainants with a means to check the status of pending complaints. Even if a two-way speak-up program is impractical, you can still address the problem of “falling-through-the-cracks” by providing a tracking process whereby the complainant can follow-up to ensure that progress is being made.

Regardless the form, participants must view the process as secure and have confidence in the speak-up officer. In our experience, when designing such a process, it is helpful to involve respected (and trusted) representatives from the campus community in the construction of the process and the selection of the third-party.

In designing the process, the following elements should be include:

1. A description of the program and what it covers.
2. Alternative methods (mail, phone, web-based) for initiating a complaint or providing anonymous information. This would include relevant phone numbers, addresses, or web-based URLs.
3. A description of how information will be used and how identities will be protected.
4. Assurance that participants will be protected from retaliation.
5. Guidance in collecting information about the issues of concern (who, what, when, where, how, etc.). As much detail about the issue as is possible.
6. An assurance that if inappropriate action is confirmed, action will be taken.
7. How feedback (or requests for additional information) will be communicated to the complainant.
8. What will happen after complaints or suggestions are received.
9. Timelines for action—what will happen next and how long it might take.
10. Methods for alerting the complainant to delays in the process; that is, a method for keeping them informed that progress is being made (their complaint has not fallen-between-the-cracks).
11. What does the complainant want? What do they hope will be done? Do they have specific suggestions for improvement?

We understand that there are potential legal concerns about such a process, especially as relates to “official university notice” of inappropriate or illegal behavior. Clearly, legal assistance from your central administration will be needed in crafting a process. We urge you to go directly to the source of those concerns to ensure that there is clarity about any potential issues and, hopefully, workable solutions. As relates to the issue of notice, it would be useful to know the precise definition of “official notice” and whether or not clearly posted warnings
stating that your speak-up program does not constitute such official notification may be sufficient in addressing that concern. Since we have no expertise in such issues, we recommend that relevant experts be included in designing and implementing the process.

Coaching/Mentoring Programs

Our Workplace Behavior (Bullying) Project Report provides a wealth of data collected through both online and paper-and-pencil versions of our survey, many group discussions, one-on-one interviews, and telephone and email conversations with a number of university employees. While our report serves to provide summary information to the entire campus community it provides no feedback to individual employees about their own behavior. Our data clearly suggest that there are bullies on campus and, although we discouraged people from identifying bullies by name, individuals have been identified to us on several occasions—in private communications. Obviously, we are not in a position to verify the accuracy of specific allegations nor are we at liberty to take action in response to such information—as our commitment to maintaining confidentiality precludes such action.

To address this deficiency, we suggest that you employ coaches and mentors in addition to the other interventions we have recommended. Executive coaching is particularly valuable for all individuals in key leadership positions. This process equips people with the knowledge, skills, and abilities they need to maximize their effectiveness in personal and professional relationships. Coaching creates an enabling and “safe” environment in which individuals may become their “best self.” Coaching is particularly important as a mechanism for “confronting” bullies about their inappropriate behavior—feedback that they are not likely to invite or accept from people with whom they work or those that they supervise. Many executive coaches specialize in dealing with “problem behavior” in managers and executives. As is often the case, leaders may not be aware of the impact of their behavior on others and the coaching process may rehabilitate a previously problematic employee. In those instances where individuals are unwilling or unable to correct their behavior, the organization may have no choice but to engage in disciplinary action, up to and possibly including termination. As noted by Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric ("General Electric: Annual report," 2000, p. 5):

…it’s about the four “types” that represent the way we evaluate and deal with our existing leaders. Type I: shares our values; makes the numbers—sky’s the limit! Type II: doesn’t share the values; doesn’t make the numbers—gone. Type III: shares the values; misses the numbers—typically, another chance, or two. None of these three are tough calls, but Type IV is the toughest call of all: the manager who doesn’t share the values, but delivers the numbers; the “go-to” manager, the hammer, who delivers the bacon but does it on the backs of people, often “kissing up and kicking down” during the process. This type is the toughest to part with because organizations always want to deliver—it’s in the blood—and to let someone go who gets the job done is yet another unnatural act. But we have to remove these Type IVs because they have the power, by themselves, to destroy the open, informal, trust-based culture we need to win today and tomorrow.

We realize that the university is a much different operating environment than GE but the sentiment expressed by Welch is important and relates directly to some major problems confronting your campus: the climate of fear (lack of trust) and a number of problem employees that are creating (and being created by) a toxic climate. While we agree that something must be done about problem behavior, we believe in redemption and the power of the system (the university) to positively impact individual and group behavior.
Recently, some organizations have employed coaching as a way of building “emotional intelligence” in leaders at all levels of the organizational hierarchy (first-line supervisors through senior and top executives). A review of the list of competencies associated with emotional intelligence quickly reveals its relationship to workplace bullying and the creation and maintenance of civility, respect, and trust:

- **Self-awareness:** Knowing one’s internal emotional states, preferences, resources, and limitations
- **Self-regulation:** Managing one’s internal emotional states, impulses, and resources
- **Motivation:** Emotional tendencies that guide or facilitate reaching goals
- **Social competence:** How we handle interpersonal relationships
- **Empathy:** Awareness of others’ feelings, needs, and concerns
- **Social skills:** Adeptness at inducing desirable responses in others

There are external and internal sources of coaching support. Externally, this includes both private practitioners as well as staff from public or government institutions. For example, as noted above, the Minnesota State Employees Assistance Program purports to have such resources, particularly for management level employees. Internally, there are likely individuals who are known on campus for their strong skills in conflict management, communication, and supervision and are considered to be “wise persons” or “role models” for how to work with others, even in difficult situations. These individuals could be identified and, with some additional training to enhance their coaching abilities, would become vital resources in facilitating individual-based change. Assuming there is a campus-wide commitment to respectful learning and working environment, being identified and trained as a coach would be viewed by many as a badge of distinction and honor.

In addition to providing coaching opportunities to people in leadership positions, there should be a process in place to provide support and developmental assistance to all employees, especially newcomers to the organization. At a general level, this should include a formal organizational socialization process that highlights important campus values and identifies and clarifies expectations about civil and respectful interpersonal behavior. This should begin in a formal organizational orientation program. We note that there is a current online employee orientation (http://www.mnsu.edu/humanres/resguide/orientation.html). It focuses primarily on the logistics of becoming an employee rather than a proactive socialization to the values and culture of the organization. An orientation program by itself will not ensure such socialization. Such programming would need to be reinforced in important policies statements and leadership actions. Visible demonstrations should include the recognition of individuals for behaving in accordance with these important core values. Some organizations have formal mentoring programs in which newcomers are assigned a formal mentor who helps them in a number of areas, for example:

Mentoring
- Helping newcomers learn about the organization
- Giving advice about behaviors that lead to recognition
- Providing specific strategies for achieving career objectives

Protection
- Shielding newcomers from problem employees
- Protecting from potentially harmful or damaging situations
- “Running interference” for the newcomer within the organization

Friendship
- Providing newcomer with someone s/he can confide in
- Offering support and encouragement
- Establishing a basis of trust and sense of “connectedness”
Social
- Helping newcomer connect and “network” with others in the organization
- Building social connections that extend beyond the workplace.

These kinds of socialization activities are meant to address both bullying and the climate of fear. First, the notion of “friendship” is antithetical to the notion of bullying. Second, the developmental and supportive activities provide an increased sense of personal security, reducing levels of stress and frustration (two variables strongly related to aggression and bullying). Third, increased interpersonal contact in a respectful environment serves as a basis for increased trust and decreased levels of suspicion, fear, and insecurity. We note that that the idea of assigning a mentor or “buddy” is part of the “Who, What, When, and How of Orienting Employees” document on the HR website. It is unclear however whether this is a process actively supported by the institution. Obviously, simply bringing people together is not enough. You must provide continual training, which includes a process in which you reinforce a set of core values associated with civility and respectful interaction.

We have discussed throughout this report the importance of core values as the grounding of and framework for policies, procedures and related actions. As noted earlier, we believe there is expertise in and potential for these various actions available on campus as demonstrated in the Leadership Institute, the Professional Development Initiative, the New Employee Orientation, and the Supervisor’s Toolkit to name a few. Also, as noted in the discussion of evidence-based management, the Minnesota State Employee Assistance Program may provide additional resources and services. Further, we would be willing to discuss further involvement on our part as resources to facilitate the development and implementation of these initiatives. The question is whether the institution and its leadership are truly committed to doing what it takes to be a respectful learning and working environment. It is clear from the data and our conversations with people on campus that they deserve and want such an environment.

Materials from other universities

1. Sample policies and associated procedures:
   a. MIT [http://hrweb.mit.edu/policy/3/3-10.html](http://hrweb.mit.edu/policy/3/3-10.html). Broadly written policy that notes that harassment of any kind is considered unacceptable; [http://web.mit.edu/communications/hg/](http://web.mit.edu/communications/hg/) - Guidelines for raising complaints about harassment – notes both formal and informal mechanisms. Website shows tie to relevant policies; notes various units, which can be involved and contacted. Very informative re what it is and is not bullying. Provides mechanisms for contact.
   c. Brock University, St. Catherines, ON, Canada [http://www.brocku.ca/hr/policies/Respectful%20Work%20and%20Learning%20Environment%20Policy.pdf](http://www.brocku.ca/hr/policies/Respectful%20Work%20and%20Learning%20Environment%20Policy.pdf). Very comprehensive policy and procedures detailing formal and informal resolution procedures including investigation procedures. The Appendix defines and describes various forms of harassment and inappropriate behavior and makes a distinction between bullying and legitimate, constructive and fair criticism.
involving informal and formal means. Has flowchart of process. Includes an appendix (4) on professional relationships.

2. Codes/Principles of Conduct
   a. University of Calgary - http://www.ucalgary.ca/hr/about_hr/policies_procedures/statement_on_principles_of_conduct. Includes the core values of the institution. Commitment to positive learning and working environment; responsibility of leadership in modeling and enforcing appropriate conduct.
   b. Syracuse University http://supolicies.syr.edu/ethics/code_conduct.htm Has established a very comprehensive “Code of Ethical Conduct” as a statement of principles to guide the activities of all faculty, staff and students.
   c. University of Toronto http://www.utoronto.ca/govcncl/pap/policies/harass.html Provides an argument for not establishing a code of conduct.

3. Material re options for dealing with harassment, discrimination etc.
   a. University of Calgary http://www.ucalgary.ca/discrimination/options/ Very comprehensive articulation of information for complainants, respondents, complaint handlers and colleagues/bystanders

4. Core Values as Framework
   a. University of Michigan http://www.urespect.umich.edu/ Describes “Expect Respect” campaign tying this to the Campus Commitment http://www.hr.umich.edu/oie/cc/of ensuring a community in which the dignity of every individual is respected. Websites define respectful environment, connect to cover values, and identify relevant policies, procedures and units for addressing various concerns. Are currently considering a policy on bullying.
   b. Syracuse University http://humanresources.syr.edu/staff/ Have a “Respectful Workplace” initiative that incorporates policies, programs and events for a discrimination and harassment free work environment. Not as extensive and far reaching as U of Michigan. Tied to the “Code of Ethical Conduct” http://supolicies.syr.edu/ethics/code_conduct.htm

5. Programming and training
   a. University of Michigan http://www.voices.umich.edu/ Have designed and implemented training sessions and a workshop series on High Quality Connections (HQC) at Work based on the work of Professor Jane Dutton, Stephen M. Ross School of Business, U of Michigan. (http://webuser.bus.umich.edu/janedut/High_Quality_Connections.htm). The HQC model focuses on 4 elements of positive working relationships: respectful engagement, task enabling, trust and play. Participant manuals and other materials have been developed. This initiative is connected into the “Expect Respect” campaign and the Campus Commitment discussed earlier under the Core Values as Framework section above. Contact person: Mary Ceccanese (ceccanes@bus.umich.edu).

   a. American Association of University Professors (AAUP) http://www(aaup.org/AAUP/pubsres/policydocs/contents/1940statement.htm discusses the meaning of academic freedom. Note that “respect for the opinions of others” is considered important part of responsible behaviors
   b. Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) http://www.caut.ca/pages.asp?page=457&lang=1 has an explicit statement on harassment free environments. http://www.caut.ca/pages.asp?page=247&lang=1 This is their policy statement on academic freedom
Materials from other organizations

1. **Joint Commissions on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCOAH)**
   [http://www.jointcommission.org/](http://www.jointcommission.org/) Details on the policies, procedures, and activities required of healthcare organizations in addressing disruptive and inappropriate behavior by healthcare workers, including physicians. Very thorough articulation of various processes and activities that need to occur to establish and support respectful and effective working environments.

2. **Veterans Health Administration (VHA) of the US Dept. of Veterans Affairs Civility, Respect and Engagement in the Workplace (CREW) initiative.** Based on data from their All Employee Surveys, the VHA became aware that (in)civility was a prime driver of key outcomes in the organization. Specifically, uncivil and disrespectful behavior was costly both at an individual level in terms of job satisfaction and productivity and at a facility level in terms of patient satisfaction and quality of care. In their third phase of an innovative pilot program, the VHA has developed a program directed at changing the culture of units to focus on respect and engagement. Working closely with employees in units, respect is defined and operationalized by the employees themselves and then support and training are provided to achieve the employee generated vision. The program has generated a lot of attention from other institutions across the US and Canada. For further information, contact Linda Belton, Director, Organizational Health, VHA at [Linda.Belton@va.gov](mailto:Linda.Belton@va.gov). See also Belton and Dyrenforth (2007)

**References**


Journal Article Referenced in Report
Lessons Learned From a 5-Year Project Within the Department of Veterans Affairs

Applying Theories of Interpersonal Aggression and Organizational Justice to the Development and Maintenance of Collaborative Social Space

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Although much has been written about the importance of generative learning to organizational effectiveness, less is known about the creation and maintenance of the “social space” necessary to foster such learning. This article describes how, as an exercise in sensemaking the authors conceptualized their experience in the establishment and preservation of such space within a 5-year action research project at the United States Department of Veteran Affairs and how theories of interpersonal aggression and organizational justice inform development of this kind of space. To this end, the authors discuss each stage of this process, which was experienced as (a) enrollment (identification of focal issues/needs, enabling conditions, social networks), (b) negotiations leading to peripheral understanding among participants (confronting tensions about methods, data, norms, roles, power, control), (c) the threshold (a “fuzzy boundary” separating collaborative from conventional social space), and (d) the emergence of collaborative social space.
Rapid technological innovation, shifting national and global political-economic contexts, increasing competitive pressures, and a need for cost-effectiveness are a few of the many forces affecting today’s organizations. In this chaotic context, how can organizations identify problems and develop practical solutions for the many challenges that they face? Both theory and practice suggest that the answer in part involves the systematic application of organizational learning and knowledge creation to enhance an organization’s social and intellectual capital. However, using this key effectively is difficult as organizations are systems of vested interests, habits of mind and practice, and existing cultures that sustain the power relationships, social norms, and taken-for-granted assumptions that are the foundation on which past effectiveness rests.

This article describes the experience of members of an action research project team in creating and sustaining the kind of collaborative social space that many theorists contend is needed for the generation of organizational learning and change. Whereas existing literature argues that this space’s creation is an important feature of generative organizational learning and knowledge creation (cf. Fisher & Torbert, 1995; Friedman, Lipshitz, & Overmeer, 2001; Nonaka, Toyama, & Byosiere, 2001; Popper & Friedman, 2002; Popper & Lipshitz, 1998; Yorks & Marsick, 2000) and advocates various learning practices that facilitate organizational learning (cf. Argyris & Schön, 1974; Isaacs, 1993; Pavlovsky, Forslin, & Reinhardt, 2001; Schein, 1993; Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, & Smith, 1994), we found little in the literature that describes the journey involved in experiencing the emergence of this kind of space. In engaging in what we are characterizing as a phenomenological reflection on our experience, we were trying to understand the how and why of our experience. Such a description provides useful “markers” of the process for organizational actors seeking to facilitate the creation of collaborative social space for purposes of generative organizational learning. In addition, we believe our experience demonstrates the value of applying extant literature on interpersonal...
aggression and organizational justice as important theoretical frames for understanding the foundations supporting this kind of space.

Our experience of this space emerged over time as we participated in the Workplace Stress and Aggression (WSA) Project, a 5-year action research initiative within the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). This project brought together a socially and professionally diverse group of academic and organization-based inquirers. The project is a robust example of collaborative management research (Shani, David, & Willson, 2004) that creates new knowledge on which the organization can take action focusing on critical themes and issues that affect organizational performance. The project is grounded in application, embraces the intimate collaboration of academics and practitioners as coinquirers, involves the fusing of rigorous quantitative and qualitative methods, and is intentional about the participants’ engaging in deep reflective inquiry about their methodology. The participants include management and union members from the VA and academics from four universities representing three different disciplines. Collectively, we have found the experience to be intense and have learned that forging and sustaining collaborative social space for knowledge creation—and in so doing confronting as we worked together issues involving interpersonal aggression and justice—are critical to the project’s success.

On the pages that follow, we begin with a descriptive framework of our experience of the emergence of collaborative social space and include a brief literature review that provides a theoretical context for our experience. We conclude with a discussion of the literature on interpersonal aggression and organizational justice that offers a more systematic, theoretically derived approach to creating this kind of space. First however, we provide a brief description of the WSA project as a contextual frame for what follows.

THE VA WORKPLACE STRESS AND AGGRESSION PROJECT

As one of largest governmental bureaucracies in the U.S. federal government, we do not believe that the VA is administered any better or more poorly than any other bureaucracy, including other large governmental organizations, universities, or many large, mature corporations for that matter. We simply have no empirical basis for making any claims one way or the other. The origin of our project was the dissatisfaction of a midlevel human resources professional in the VA headquarters who began ruminating about how some recurring disciplinary problems seemed to be symptomatic consequences incurred from the pressures of workplace stress and aggression. Disciplinary actions did little to address underlying causes. “I was repeating what I had done for 16 years . . . [without] addressing the real underlying causes” of employee behavior requiring disciplinary actions. He subsequently initiated internal conversations among midlevel VA managers about the problem of workplace aggression (that is, negative workplace behavior). These conversations were the genesis of a process that over time led to the creation of a network of academic members and additional VA stakeholders.

The early conversations among VA practitioners first led to the identification of two researchers prominent in the literature on aggression in organizations and agreement
to gather data while creating an instrument for measuring stress and aggression. Subsequent conversation within the practitioners’ professional networks brought the project to the attention of academics associated with a university-based center for human resource management study that added two additional foci to the project. The first was the development of quantitative models that we could use to explore the nature, prevalence, causes, and consequences of stress and aggression within the organization and using these data, develop a business case for dealing with these variables (Harmon et al., 2003). Our second focus was the adoption of a practice-grounded action-research (AR) model in which we could test data and assumptions and could formulate, implement, and evaluate interventions. An important aspect of this focus was a link to the literature on organizational learning (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Marsick & Watkins, 1999; Popper & Lipshitz, 1998; Senge, 1990) and new forms of knowledge production (Gibbons et al., 1994). We formalized these goals within a National Science Foundation (NSF) grant (see authors’ note). Obtaining the NSF grant marked the beginning of a formalized yet very emergent and fluid collaborative action inquiry project.

A detailed report on the project and its results are available elsewhere (Kowalski, Harmon, Yorks, & Kowalski, 2003; Neuman, 2004). Our focus here is on a specific characteristic of the “social system” that emerged as part of the project process, what we have come to refer to as collaborative social space. This space was socially created through the patterns of relationships that were emergent as project team members internalized various learning practices (described below). Through an intensive process of collaborative reflective meaning making of our experience (also described in the following), we have come to define collaborative social space as an interpersonal environment that group members cocreate through the repeated, intentional use of learning practices, systematic personal and group reflection, and the application of principles of organizational justice. Collaborative social space embodies a social and emotional atmosphere in which group members experience a sense of engagement, safety, energy, flow, and synergy resulting in generative learning and cooperative action that they perceive as resulting from a unique collective experience. This is a collectively experienced phenomenon.

We experienced this space as opening and closing, depending on how project members interacted with one another. Retrospectively, we have come to understand the project as having transitioned from an emergent network to a project team whose boundaries became more clarified as a function of the design embedded in the NSF proposal, internal VA funding sources, and design of the data gathering and analysis process. We conceptualize this design as the scaffolding that held the process, a scaffolding that was both bounded and porous, providing support and functional context for the project. This scaffolding has many of the characteristics of what Pava (1983) describes as a sociotechnical systems approach for designing work, specifically, a forum or arena consisting of discretionary coalitions in which a topic can be deliberated.

Collaborative social space, as we experienced it and give meaning to the experience, is the emergence of generative learning relationships that is a source of a particular energy within the scaffolding infusing it with vitality. Consistent with the dynamics described by Pava (1983), team members negotiate and design the scaffolding while in action. Collaborative social space emerges within the context of this scaffolding. Thus, the design of the scaffolding with the intentional use of using learning practices to facil-
itate organizational learning (Friedman et al., 2001; Pavlovsky et al., 2001) was a structural holding environment providing for the possibility of emergence of what we are referring to as the experience of collaborative social space. This collaborative social space is mutually enacted through the ways of being in relationship with one another (both are critical aspects of such a forum or arena—two parts of the same system). A number of authors discuss the nature of collaborative space and describe the insider/outsider role tensions of participants in business/university collaborations (Coghlan & Brannick, 2000; Dixon, 1997; G. Roth & Kleiner, 2000; J. Roth, Sandberg, & Svensson, 2004). Although these discussions have done much to inform us as to the nature of collaborative space, they only hint at the struggles over issues and roles that we faced as we experienced the fluidity and fragileness of these kinds of spaces.

We believe this space was critical to our ability to bridge the divergent frames of reference that various members of the project team held, different academic disciplines and fields of practitioner expertise necessary for implementing the projects. We acknowledge that the creation of this kind of space does not guarantee success, but we would argue that its absence stymies opportunities for generative organizational learning. We also acknowledge that the framework described below is one way of constructing meaning from our experience—tracking how our experience of the relationship among us changed over time and how to explain the qualitative differences of the nature of the experience.

Making Sense of Our Experience of Collaborative Social Space

For some time we had commented among ourselves on how periodically some of us experienced our conversations within the project team as qualitatively different from other times. We noticed that these periods were particularly rich in terms of producing new insights. Stimulated by these comments, one of the practitioners on the project team generated a descriptive framework that he circulated among other project team members for comment. This framework subsequently became the basis for a discussion at a “greenhouse” workshop sponsored by the Society for Organizational Learning held in 2003, during which those in attendance raised additional questions about our experience.

Further enthused by these discussions, we began a series of deeper conversations about how we had experienced the project’s evolution, especially critical meetings at various junctures throughout the process. Paul Ricoeur (1971) argues that the lived experience of the participants can be treated as a text to be interpreted. For Ricoeur, this text is found in the dialogues that take place and in the actions that constitute the group’s history. Delving more deeply into our experience, sharing different lens on our shared experiences in the project and how we experienced changes in our practice, we were able to make explicit connections between the reflective dialogues and use of various learning practices following critical events and what we had variously experienced as qualitative changes in the project team as an emerging social system. In our discussions, we cycled between describable events and our different reactions to them and which interpretations best fit our experience of the project as it unfolded.

We were making sense or meaning out of our experience, albeit not in a “Weickian” (Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005) sense. Our process was also not one of developing grounded theory (Glaser, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss &
Corbin, 1991). We understood this to be a process of collaborative meaning making of our experience through retrospective reflection on our experience of the shifts in our conversations and interactions in the project team, with reference to specific events and contexts that had become embedded markers of the project. We were construing our experience through descriptive and evaluative reflection (Heron, 1988) with the intention of giving it coherence (Mezirow, 1991). We then turned to the literature on interpersonal aggression and social justice as a way of further situating this experience because the very nature of the presenting problem in the WSA project made us sensitive to the issues of interpersonal aggression and social justice we were experiencing within the project team. This was a process of meaning making in the sense of schematizing, appropriating, and seeking to validate our experience (Mezirow, 1991).

Through this process of inquiry we conceptualized our experience of the collaborative space-creating process as four distinct yet overlapping phases: (a) enrollment, (b) crafting peripheral understanding, (c) crossing the threshold into collaborative space, and (d) working within the collaborative space. We also made connections between our experience and how tenets of the literature on interpersonal aggression and organizational justice can inform practices of organizational learning. Although we describe the phases as having distinct characteristics, we experienced the process as nonlinear and constantly ebbing and flowing. Our experience has been that we spent considerable time in the first two phases. Figure 1 summarizes the phases of the framework and the most salient issues we experienced in each phase. We use the framework to describe our experience.
**Enrollment.** Although the details of the events that unfolded are specific to the WSA project, the knowledge creation and learning process that followed in many ways provides an example of the challenges involved in establishing complex, practice-driven organizational learning mechanisms (Friedman et al., 2001; Popper & Friedman, 2002; Popper & Lipshitz, 1998). Such mechanisms are typically emergent networks of alliances among cooperating stakeholders, each of which bring the network resources and/or needed expertise. This was certainly characteristic of the VA WSA project team, which was initially constructed as a discretionary network of diverse participants engaging in deliberations that often required trade-offs to be made among various disciplinary-based viewpoints and approaches (Pava, 1983).

As previously mentioned, the midlevel HR professional who was frustrated by his inability to address the causes and consequences of disciplinary actions started identifying researchers working in this area. He also initiated conversations with colleagues who shared his frustration, particularly having seen many large system change efforts fail because the rhetoric that accompanied these initiatives was disconnected from the actual values evident in how the organization implemented new programs. This began the process of recruiting potential participants for a project team through networking with a diverse group of practitioners and researchers from VA and academia.

This process of networking led to an initial meeting of potential participants in the project. During this initial meeting, Dan Twomey, director of the Center for Human Resource Studies at Fairleigh Dickinson University (who was hosting the event), encouraged participants to embrace (as opposed to hiding or suppressing) their differences and make them “public.” In response to this suggestion, we went around the table and everyone talked about their interests and concerns, surfacing different “agendas.” This meeting subsequently led to a self-selection process, with some participants opting out of further participation, others opting in.

**Crafting peripheral understanding.** Even following such frank and open discussion and people having opted into the project, significant differences in experiences and orientations toward knowledge creation and research were present in the team. In the WSA project the fault lines of negotiations manifested themselves as tensions related to (a) control, (b) timing and taking action, (c) role boundaries, (d) research methodology, (e) the validity and utility of quantitative and qualitative data and knowledge, and (f) interpersonal behavior. Underlying these tensions were more fundamental issues of purpose and visions of what would constitute a successful project and the diverse motivations for project participation. Compounding these tensions was a confrontation between deeply held worldviews about what constitutes meaningful knowledge, how it can be generated, and the requirements for having it taken seriously by various audiences both within and beyond the organization. Debate over the timing of interventions, the pace of action, and the focus on mutual benefit to the university- and organization-based researchers can be heard in comments such as the following: “The university researchers did not want to contaminate the experimental portion of the project by suggesting interventions while the VA researchers were conscious of the need to move forward.”

It was the introduction of learning practices drawn from models of action science (Argyris & Schön, 1974), reflective practice (Schön, 1983), and organizational behavior
and learning (Bohm, 1996; Isaacs, 1993; Schein, 1993; Senge et al., 1994) that began the process of “peripheral understanding”—going beyond negotiation and creating a lens of mutual, peripheral, understanding of others and their worldviews, along with a growing understanding of the rich complexity and context of the inquiry question and project objectives and the emerging role ambiguity among participants. These learning practices included such methods as (a) stop-and-reflect, (b) left-hand column, (c) end-of-meeting reflection, (d) the learning window, and (e) harvesting the learning. They were initially introduced on a “pilot” basis with one of the academic members of the project team advocating that an academic versed in these practices attend a meeting and use some methods that would assist the group in reflecting and making explicit their learning. Based on this initial experience, the group invited this person to join the team as a learning facilitator.

Over time, the practices surfaced concerns and behaviors that were inhibiting the group from moving forward. Used to temporarily create space in the conversation, they allowed members to listen more carefully, surface unquestioned assumptions, and come to recognize how these assumptions might reflect preheld worldviews that are being imposed on the problem and perhaps are driving decisions and actions based on uncertain knowledge and facts.

It is important to note that the project team used these practices sparingly, only when the team needed space for getting “outside of itself” to move forward or engage in particularly difficult meaning making. Many project team members only accepted these practices through the experience of having a particular practice move the group’s learning forward or provide a personal (and powerful) insight. For example, one group member commented, “Prior to the introduction of the learning practices, participants often talked past each other,” and another individual noted that “Until I was able to have an out of body experience, to watch myself and the group in action, I was not open to differences and possibilities.” Finally, in the words of one academic member of the project team, “My focus shifted to considering the anti-thetical nature of collaboration and aggression. Furthermore, I began to reflect on the dynamics of the project team and how they evolved over time. This led to sensitivity toward process over product.”

At first, the learning practices seemed artificial, but as their use became naturalized, their importance grew as they created a safe space for diverse views and opinions. As members experienced the benefits of using these practices to change conversations in productive ways, the practices became group competencies as opposed to techniques. Over time their use shifted from being basic process interventions to spaces for engaging in reflexive conversation on our methods and actions. This shift was important scaffolding for crossing the threshold.

**Crossing the threshold.** We have labeled the point where a qualitative change in the experience of participating in the project team occurred as the threshold, transforming the project team from a more conventional workgroup to functioning as a collaborative social space. In reflecting on our experience, this transformation did not occur simultaneously for each participant. One member reflecting on the most productive meetings said, “Some participants regularly crossed the threshold, some
did less frequently, some hovered on the threshold but quickly retreated. When most were in the space, the interactions were respectful, playful, enlightening and quickly productive.” These transitions seemed to parallel the learning of individuals on the team as they developed greater awareness of their own behavior and learning, their interaction with others, and the team as a system. This learning is deeper in some members than others. In the words of two members, “The learning practices helped me ‘quiet’ the mad rush of daily activities” and “When I found this space internally, I found this space with others.”

Movement back and forth across the threshold from collaborative social space to peripheral understanding and back again continued, but over time and when regression occurred corrections came more quickly.

**Working within the collaborative space.** Use of the learning practices in an intuitive and nonformulaic way had a number of important implications for the establishment of collaborative social space. Use of inquiry methods and structured periodic reflection fostered deeper listening, allowed the group to recognize behavior that was impeding the group’s progress, and provided the interpersonal support for collaborative space. Participants were able to expand their view of diversity beyond race and gender and recognize the different worldviews based on their education, training, and work experience. In the words of one project team member,

I became aware of tempering my advocacy. I would frame my comments as “this is what the literature says,” but be open to possible alternative explanations. I was not as confrontational as in the past. I would qualify my comments.

The diversity of opinions and the willingness to test assumptions and explore those differences created the psychological safety to raise undiscussables. As one of VA members of the team commented, “We talked about sensitive issues in the project meetings that we would not talk about in other meetings.” For example, during a meeting in the first year of the project two female members of the project team raised the issue of gender, specifically identifying what they experienced as problematic behavior on the part of one of the male members of the project team. This problem had previously flared up at a meeting, but this time a constructive conversation ensued.

Although difficult to define in absolute terms, through reflecting on our experience a consensus has emerged within our group about some of the most important attributes associated with our participation in this kind of collaborative social space. Specifically, we experienced the space as nonhierarchical in nature and characterized by a high degree of interpersonal openness, honesty, and information sharing. It was this space that allowed us to focus on learning, engaging in deep reflection, testing, and challenging tacit assumptions underlying our individual and group behavior.

Having painted this rosy picture, we must point out that our individual mind-sets were always present, silent and lurking under the conversation. Within each participant, there was a constant tendency to revert to individually formed certainty based on long years of training and socialization within an academic or organization profession. The presenting problem itself informed the awareness of behaviors among participants.
and made behavior within the collaborative social space an open topic of discussion. In short, we learned that collaborative social space is fragile, subject to disruption by strong personalities and situational forces. Consequently, it was important to remain vigilant to the presence of these rather substantial forces.

THEORETICAL FRAMING OF THE EXPERIENCE

We were of course aware of the literature on organizational learning throughout the process. We were intentional in applying the learning practices advocated by this literature. Yet, we found little guidance that prepared us for both how powerful and as noted earlier, how fragile such spaces are.

We experienced the space we created in the VA WSA project as sharing many of the characteristics that Fisher and Torbert (1995) describe as a “liberating structure,” an environment conducive for “turn[ing] tensions, dilemmas, and gaps . . . into occasions for learning and improved competence . . . that is productive and . . . educates its members towards self-correcting awareness” (p. 7). The creation of a safe space or “container” for engaging in open inquiry is a recurring theme in the literature on the kind of learning that occurs in knowledge creation processes. Mezirow (1991) emphasizes the importance of trust and security as a precondition for the kind of discourse necessary for fostering transformative learning. Nonaka and his associates (2001) describe this as \textit{ba}, a context in which knowledge is shared, created, and used: “The most important aspect of ‘\textit{ba}’ is interaction” (p. 499).

The conversations within the collaborative social space had the qualities that produce what Kasl, Marsick, and Dechant (1997) describe as synergistic team learning. Mind-sets began to merge as certainty diminished. Participants suspended judgments as they listened and reassessed original positions and underlying beliefs. They adopted a critical self-view of their long-held beliefs and assumptions, joined in a playful repartee of ideas in nonjudgmental openness, and listened intensely without feeling the need to speak in opposition. The tension between distinct views and fragmented knowledge played against synergistic sense making and contributed to the richness of the conversations and data analysis.

An interesting phenomenon that we encountered while operating within collaborative social space was our experience with “flow,” characterized in part by a sense of playfulness, concentration of effort and highly focused attention, a good match between the challenge at hand and one’s skills and abilities, a mental enjoyment of the activity for its own sake, and a distorted sense of time (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). We often found (and continue to find) ourselves “lost in our activities” and surprised by the quick passage of time.

Again however, this sense of flow was juxtaposed with the underlying stresses that accompanied the project team’s diverse composition. When a socially diverse team of inquirers forms such an alliance, effectively addressing these challenges requires that the members transcend the focus of their various disciplines and practice areas while bringing their disciplinary expertise to the process (Gibbons et al., 1994; Nowotny, Scott, & Gibbons, 2001). The principle involved here is a variation of what has been
called the paradox of diversity (Yorks & Kasl, 2002). The more complex the issue and diverse the group of people involved in the process of trying to resolve it, the greater the potential for transformative learning. At the same time, the less likely it is that participants in the group will be able to create the social space necessary for understanding each other’s point of view, thus blocking their capacity for generating new learning and transformation. The need for creating collaborative social space is directly related to the degree of the question’s complexity, the diversity of thought required for addressing it, and the group members’ diversity. In describing our experience, we came to realize the particular relevance of the interpersonal aggression and organizational justice literature for understanding the conditions necessary for establishing and maintaining collaborative social space in such settings—and by extension the importance of this literature for understanding organizational learning.

**Collaborative Social Space and Theories of Interpersonal Aggression and Organizational Justice**

Proponents of organizational learning, “though providing compelling models and illustrations of learning organizations, provide little guidance on how to get there from here” (Friedman et al., 2001, p. 757). Also noted by these authors, “Collective defenses make organizational double-loop learning unlikely, particularly under conditions of potential embarrassment or threat” (p. 757). In reflecting on our experiences in the WSA project, we came to recognize the relevance of interpersonal aggression and organizational justice theories in addressing both of these issues. In the following sections, we suggest the benefits of incorporating these theories in the study of organizational learning in general and the creation and maintenance of collaborative social space in particular. We follow this discussion with concrete suggestions for translating this research into practice through the application of organizational justice principles.

**Aggression, Cooperation, Collaboration, and Justice**

As noted earlier, the WSA project originally focused on obtaining a better understanding of the causes and consequences of aggression and stress in the workplace and developing interventions to address these issues. Originally, our collaborative action inquiry approach served two purposes. First, it was a process that we employed to improve interpersonal dynamics within our project and action teams. Second, it served as a means of learning about our interpersonal dynamics and the dynamics of the larger organization. In short, the use of collaborative action inquiry and the creation of collaborative social space were originally viewed as a means to an end—the creation, implementation, and evaluation of useful workplace aggression interventions. Along the way, we came to realize that the process was the product. That is, we came to see that the creation and maintenance of collaborative social space improved our interpersonal behavior. In particular, it changed the very nature and quality of the conversations that we were having within and between the teams. We suddenly (if belatedly) realized that aggression and collaboration are antithetical concepts. Whereas aggression involves efforts to harm others (Baron & Richardson, 1994; Berkowitz, 1993; Geen, 1991), collaboration involves efforts to help (or cooperate with) others, as highlighted in the term
co-operative inquiry (Coghlan & Brannick, 2000; Reason, 1999). Shani et al. (2004) refer to a true partnership in collaborative research as “the dynamics of equality and integration—based on values, actions, processes, and consequences—around a shared goal or vision for the purpose of creating something (scientific and actionable knowledge) by two or more entities” (pp. 83-84). Although this seems obvious on its face, closer examination suggests that many of the theoretical variables that reduce the likelihood of aggression and conflict are the same variables that encourage trust, cooperation, and collaboration.

The most critical of these variables involves perceptions of interpersonal fair treatment. When asked to describe situations that make them angry, most individuals refer to something another person said or did—something that caused them to become upset and view aggression against this person as justified (Harris, 1993; Torestad, 1990). In describing these “provocative” words or deeds, individuals often characterize them as unfair and suggest that they plan to “get even” or “exact justice” (Bies & Tripp, 1996, 1998). The relationship between perceptions of unfair treatment and the restoration of equity is the motivation underlying a significant portion of the research on social justice. As suggested by Homans (1974), “We should be much less interested in injustice if it did not lead so often to anger and aggression” (p. 257).

With respect to the concept of justice, Lerner (1981) suggests that this involves “an appropriate correspondence between a person’s fate and that to which he or she is entitled—what is deserved” (p. 12). Rule and Ferguson (1984) discuss norm violations as an instance of “is-ought discrepancy” and suggest that anger, blaming, and retaliation might ensue when people see their partly idiosyncratic norms of proper conduct (oughts) violated. In a similar vein, referent cognitions theory (Folger, 1986, 1987) suggests that with respect to outcome allocation, “resentment is maximized when people believe they would have obtained better outcomes if the decision maker had used other procedures that should have been implemented” (Cropanzano & Folger, 1989, pp. 293-294). Finally, Tedeschi and Felson (1994) suggest that any factor that increases the likelihood that norm violations will be committed should lead to grievances and coercive interactions.

Conversely, perceptions of fair treatment are associated with the establishment of trust and cooperation. For example, Folger and Konovsky (1989) find that employees who felt that their supervisors had conducted “fair” performance appraisals tended to exhibit greater levels of trust and liking toward these individuals and significantly lower levels of negative affect than those perceiving “unfair” evaluations. Related research has demonstrated a consistent and positive association between all forms of organizational justice (distributive, procedural, interactional/interpersonal—discussed in more detail in the following) and the development of trust, positive affect, and an assortment of organizational citizenship behaviors (Brockner & Siegel, 1996; Mishra, 1996; Pillai, Schriesheim, & Williams, 1999; Pillai, Williams, & Tan, 2001; Saunders & Thornhill, 2003). These findings are consistent with the seminal work of Gouldner (1960) on negative and positive reciprocity and Blau’s (1964) work on social exchange theory, the bases for subsequent justice research.

Building in part on the research previously described, aggression researchers have developed complex integrative theories and models describing the factors that
lead to—or diminish the likelihood of—aggression. Consistent with these contemporary theories of interpersonal aggression (C. A. Anderson, Anderson, & Deuser, 1996; C. A. Anderson & Bushman, 2002; K. B. Anderson, Anderson, Dill, & Deuser, 1998; Bushman & Anderson, 2001) and more recent research on workplace aggression (Baron, Neuman, & Geddes, 1999; Neuman, 2004; Neuman & Baron, 1998, 2005), any variables that increase negative affect or hostile cognitions may begin a process that leads to an aggressive response. In essence, from either a cognitive neoassociationistic (Berkowitz, 1989, 1990, 1993) or a general aggression theory perspective (C. A. Anderson & Bushman, 2002), internal affective and cognitive states (elicited by external or internal stimuli) trigger related (i.e., associated) knowledge structures. Specifically, when a concept is primed or activated in memory, the activation spreads to related concepts and increases their activation as well. According to C. A. Anderson and Bushman (2002), three particularly relevant structures include:

(a) perceptual schemata, which are used to identify phenomena as simple as everyday physical objects (chair, person) or as complex as social events (personal insult); (b) person schemata, which include beliefs about a particular person or groups of people; and (c) behavioral scripts, which contain information about how people behave under varying circumstances. (p. 33)

As an example, exposure to emotional or physiological pain will trigger related knowledge structures along with previously associated thoughts, feelings, and physiological responses. Conversely, exposure to variables associated with well-being, security, confidence, or trust will be more likely to activate more positive knowledge structures.

Within this framework, it is possible to consider the potential impact of a wide variety of variables, but as noted earlier, we focus our attention on justice perceptions because of their demonstrated impact on aggression and cooperation. Within the context of the general aggression framework, justice perceptions clearly impact affective and cognitive responses. Of most interest in the creation of collaborative social space we focus on positively toned emotional reactions (e.g., joy and optimism as compared with anger, irritation, or rage) and associated cognitions regarding trust, cooperation, and collaboration as compared with mistrust, opposition, and hostility.

Contemporary theories of aggression suggest (and empirical research clearly demonstrates) that thoughts (cognitions) can activate related emotional (affective) reactions; conversely, emotional reactions can activate related thoughts. This same relationship was discussed in the seminal literature in the justice area. For example, “If a state of injustice exists and it is to a man’s disadvantage—that is, the man experiences deprivation—he will display the emotional behavior we call anger” (Homans, 1961, p. 75). The connection between justice perceptions and the elicitation of emotions is also discussed in more recent research (see e.g., Barclay, Skarlicki, & Pugh, 2005; Mikula, Scherer, & Athenstaedt, 1998; Weiss, Suckow, & Cropanzano, 1999).

Finally, we draw on a completely different line of research that provides independent evidence showing that activation spreads to related structures of cognition and affect. We refer to extensive work by Alice Isen and her colleagues exploring the relationship between positive and negative affect, cognition, and behavior. In this rather large body of work, compelling evidence is presented demonstrating a relationship between

To summarize, a substantial amount of theoretical and empirical work demonstrates that a common set of variables serves as antecedents to and correlates of aggression and cooperation—to the extent that they activate negative or positive emotions and cognitions, respectively. Furthermore, justice and injustice perceptions are among the most powerful antecedents to aggression and cooperation within this theoretical base—one that has not been considered or applied to organizational learning in general or the development and maintenance of collaborative social space in particular. Beyond their ability to elicit powerful thoughts, feelings, and ultimately behaviors, perceptions of justice and injustice also serve as important antecedents to and consequences of trust (and distrust), an important element in the development of effective collaboration (Lewicki, McAllister, & Bies, 1998).

Moving From Research to Practice: Organizational Justice Theories and the Establishment of Collaborative Social Space

Whereas the literature on interpersonal aggression cited previously serves as a strong theoretical base, the related theories of organizational justice provide insights about translating theory into practice; or in the words of Friedman et al. (2001), the justice literature tells us “how to get there from here” (p. 757).

The importance of fair treatment and the establishment of trust. Mishra (1996) suggests that “trust is one party’s willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the belief that the latter party is (a) competent, (b) open, (c) concerned, and (d) reliable” (p. 256). At a minimum, trust means that one party believes that it will not be taken unfair advantage of by another party. As noted previously, the notion that fair treatment is related to the development of trust has received strong support in the organizational behavior literature. However, although perceptions of fair treatment are so central to the development and maintenance of trust, and by extension collaborative space, there is little evidence that the substantial literature on organizational justice (Greenberg, 1987) and theories of interpersonal aggression have been considered (or applied) to collaborative action inquiry in general or the development of collaborative space in particular. It is our contention that justice theories can make a substantial contribution to an understanding of collaborative social space as described earlier and provide practical applications that may be employed in the creation and maintenance of collaborative space across a broad array of work settings. The literature identifies three forms of organizational justice: (a) distributive, (b) procedural, and (c) interactional. Each is important in the establishment of trust and the development of collaborative space.

Distributive justice. Distributive justice relates to perceptions of fair treatment associated with the outcomes or allocations that a person receives in a given situation or an interpersonal exchange or transaction. Specifically, people judge the ratio of their
inputs (their investments, both in financial and nonfinancial terms) to their outcomes (the financial and nonfinancial benefits that they derive from these investments) and are sensitive to any disparity in this ratio (Adams, 1965). This phenomenon also serves as the basis for the psychological contract, an individual’s beliefs about the terms and conditions of a reciprocal exchange agreement between the person and another party (Rousseau, 1989). As relates to the development of trust and the establishment of collaborative space, our process makes the terms of social exchange more explicit.

We previously highlighted the initial orientation meeting at Fairleigh Dickinson University as important in establishing a foundation for the group. We made each other aware of our interests and expectations and discussed how we would function as a team. This laid the basis for subsequent conversations in which we covered such issues as how to handle leadership responsibilities, logistics, individual and group roles and accountability, and the domain of our action. Our discussions provided the foundation for the development of mutual understanding and openness and consequently establishing and “codifying” our social contract. From an aggression research perspective, this reduces the likelihood of misattribution (or more important, hostile attributions) and provides more reasonable expectations regarding potential outcomes.

In retrospect, these open conversations were the beginning of the establishment of trust and a shared sense that the group could hold together through difficult interpersonal exchanges. In their extensive study of 27 work groups of diverse types and contexts, Hackman (1990) and his colleagues conclude that groups that somehow got onto a good track tended to perform better as time passed, whereas those that got into difficulty found that their problems compounded over time. For this and other reasons, a well-managed enrollment process is critical.

These open enrollment conversations sowed the early seeds of procedural justice in which bias is suppressed (or least exposed) by surfacing individual differences and personal agendas in an attempt to integrate the interests of all parties. Through this process of honest (minimally censored) interaction, accurate information is made available for decision making, resulting in access to a transparent mechanism to negotiate a consistent (equitable) allocation of resources. In those instances when individuals felt aggrieved, our process encouraged the expression of such feelings and provided an opportunity to address perceived wrongs. From the beginning, this led to feelings—among team members—that the group was “special.” This created a willingness to experiment with learning practices that would permit the eventual emergence of the collaborative social space.

Procedural and interactional/interpersonal justice. Just as individuals are concerned with the fairness of the outcomes that they receive, they also are sensitive to the process used to determine those outcomes (procedural justice; Thibaut & Walker, 1975) and the nature of the interactions that characterize those transactions (interactional justice, Bies & Moag, 1986; interpersonal justice, Greenberg, 1993). These forms of justice provide practical tools for establishing trust and for developing and maintaining collaborative space.

With respect to procedural justice, research suggests that individuals are likely to perceive procedures as fair to the extent that they (a) suppress bias, (b) create consistent allocations, (c) rely on accurate information, (d) are correctable, (e) represent the
concerns of all recipients, and (f) are based on prevailing moral and ethical standards (Leventhal, 1976, 1980). Some practical examples of this include procedures in which all parties have some voice in the decision-making process, believe that their voice is being heard, and believe that they have some choice in determining the outcomes (Folger, 1977). As regards interactional elements, fair processes are those in which individuals are treated with sensitivity, consideration, and politeness (Bies & Moag, 1986; Greenberg, 1993; Mikula, Petri, & Tanzer, 1990).

The learning practices were the mechanism for moving toward establishing the collaborative social space. They enabled an initial set of actions that became habits that created spaces that were both part of yet separate from the meeting—defined safe containers in which people would pay attention and listen. Within these containers of collaborative social space, participants knew that they would get an equal chance to speak. As a result, the group as a whole had access to seeing things through different lenses and had open access to information. Although labeled learning practices, they also provided a method for establishing the conditions of distributive, procedural, and interpersonal justice and the ensuing development of trust. This was particularly evident in the creation of a process for surfacing the concerns of all participants, addressing each others’ wants and needs, continually examining (and when necessary adjusting) individual and group behavior, providing for reliable information and correctable action. In short, the learning practices helped to promote and ensure a “safe” and supportive social space. As project team members experienced the power of the practices for systematically surfacing agendas through providing all parties with a voice (Folger, 1977; Thibaut & Walker, 1975), the practices were increasingly used with authenticity (as opposed to a technique to be followed). As one participant put it,

Most people don’t have conversations where they’re really listening, being very honest or genuine about what’s going on, and aware of the parts they’re not saying. It’s darn hard to work with people to resolve complicated issues unless you’re listening and being honest and having that kind of trust.

To summarize, we believe that perceptions of distributive, procedural, and interactional justice contribute to the development and maintenance of collaborative space. In particular, when people perceive that justice exists, this perception helps establish trust and feelings of fairness leading to interpersonal openness, honesty, and information sharing. People are able to engage in a process of coinquiry in which they feel free to surface, test, and (when necessary) challenge tacit assumptions underlying individual and group behavior. For the WSA project, perceptions of justice informed our practice with each other and set behavioral standards for interpersonal interactions.

**SUMMARY REFLECTIONS ON THE PROCESS OF CREATING COLLABORATIVE SOCIAL SPACE**

Conversations consist of the words and message spoken (the content dimension) and a pattern of interaction among the participants (the relationship dimension; Baker, 2002). During the enrollment phase, content predominates as the individuals speak from their own perspective to the group, speaking from the common ground established by the
project’s initiators through information sharing. During the phase of crafting peripheral understanding, the participants begin to seek negotiated common ground establishing a communicative relationship. These first two phases give shape to the scaffolding of the forum, or arena, for learning, with intentional use of learning practices. But as trust develops and the participants begin to understand each other’s worldview, the conversation begins to change in an important way. The parties listen more than speak and struggle to understand rather than oppose the ideas of others. The trusting relationship that develops leads to the threshold of collaborative social space. In the space, ideas emerge and merge as the individuals allow themselves to become more vulnerable, express less certainty, experiment with new ideas, and create new tools. The ideas that emerge cannot be attributed to any single individual as a playful morphing process makes individual attribution difficult to reconstitute. In fact, the ideas that emerge from the collaborative space probably could not have been generated outside of the space. Those who remain in the space not only begin to make explicit their tacit understanding of ideas and concepts but also absorb and internalize the tacit knowledge of others. Participants remain bound to their experience and professional responsibilities while bringing their views to the service of a merged collective effort. Their personal experience contributes to the whole as the learning of the whole reshapes how they understand their individual roles. The interpenetration of roles is visible to an outsider as well. A union leader who was attending his first project meeting reflected, “I cannot tell the difference between the academics and the VA people.”

The assumptions, ideas, beliefs, skills, and abilities that we individually brought into the collaborative space became intermingled and distributed as we learned from each other. After 6 years together, it is almost impossible to identify individual authorship of an idea or contribution and most impressively, little evidence of resentment over this fact.

Nothing in our prior experience prepared us for what we encountered in the past 6 years. Perhaps the most telling source of the process’s validation is the extent to which the individual learning from the process has been transferred to other settings. One university-based participant said,

I used to teach as if things were either true or false. I don’t do that anymore. Now I talk to people like here’s my relationship to what I think this means. What does it mean to you? If it meant this or that, what would show up for us? What could we do with that idea? How could we be more effective? I’m looking to provoke more communicating. In fact, a lot of the stuff I used to know as the “truth,” at best I’ll recognize I only think I know and there’s even more that I thought I know that I don’t know. So it’s been profoundly changing for me personally and professionally.

A union official commented,

A take away for me is that I’m more aware of how I present myself to employees, that I listen to them when they have issues, that I’m more cognizant how they feel when they’re talking to me, what gives them concern and that we address those concerns.

Another source of validation for the process we described, and its potential pay-off for participants, comes from our patron. When asked whether this undertaking was worth the effort, he replied,
Do I think it’s worth the squeeze? Unequivocally! I think it’s worth the squeeze in terms of developing this process as a way of doing business, and in terms of developing evidence around what we do as managers.

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