
Reuben Mark Initiative for
Organizational Character and
Leadership Research Series

Plausible Deniability: Improving Employee Reporting at Work

Leadership Implications

- A new survey technique, called hard garbling, gives employees plausible deniability, making them more willing to report sensitive workplace concerns.
- In its first real-world application, the technique substantially increased disclosure of harassment, finding what traditional reporting missed.
- Leaders can use hard garbling as an early-warning system to identify cultural issues before they escalate.

Too often, leaders learn about serious problems in their organizations only after they have become severe, costly, or public. Employees may remain silent about emerging concerns because they fear retaliation or reputational harm. Building trust in the confidentiality of reporting channels is therefore essential to encouraging employees to share early, actionable information. New research affiliated with the Reuben Mark Initiative for Organizational Character and Leadership at Columbia Business School provides the first real-world test of an experimental survey method designed to reassure employees and elicit more candid responses.

In “Monitoring Harassment in Organizations,” Bernstein research grant recipient Laura Boudreau and co-authors Sylvain Chassang of Princeton University, Ada González-Torres of Ben Gurion University, and Rachel Heath of University of Washington, find that giving employees plausible deniability significantly increases their willingness to disclose workplace problems.

Field Testing the Technique

Boudreau and her co-authors tested “hard garbling” in partnership with a large Bangladeshi garment manufacturer, surveying 2,244 workers by phone about their experiences with harassment by direct supervisors. The method provides workers with plausible deniability by automatically recording some responses as complaints. Workers were told that one in five answers to questions about harassment would be automatically recorded as “yes.” This gave them a way to deny having reported an issue while making it safer to report sensitive experiences without fear of being blamed later.

To assess its effectiveness, the researchers compared hard garbling to standard direct questioning, to building rapport with respondents, and to removing identifying

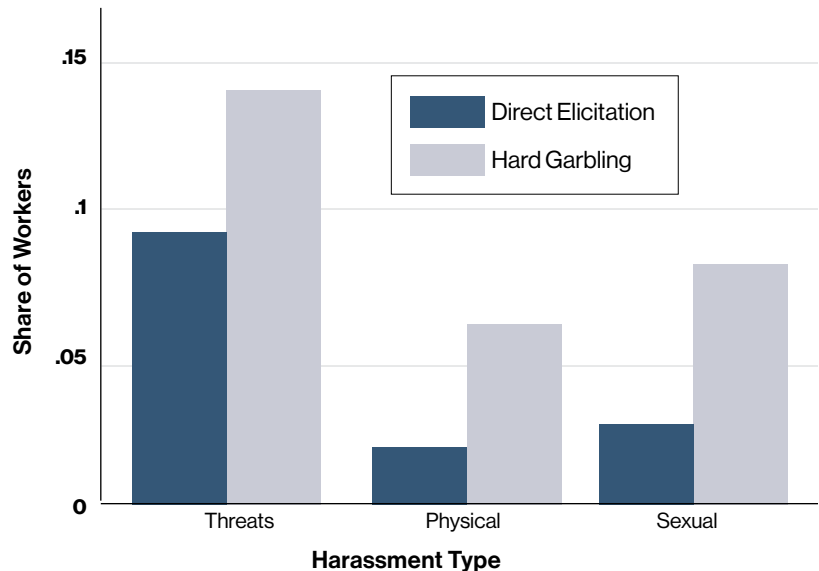
information about supervisors and production teams. After statistically adjusting the raw data to estimate workers’ true reporting rates, hard garbling increased disclosure of threatening behavior by 45.4%, physical harassment

by 290%, and sexual harassment by 271%, relative to direct questioning’s low baseline rates of 9.9%, 1.53%, and 1.78%. By comparison, rapport-building and removing identifying information produced only modest, mostly insignificant gains.

The technique also revealed harassment was far more widespread at the team level. Under hard garbling, 71.9% of teams had at least one worker report threatening behavior, compared to 44.6% under direct questioning.

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The Results of Hard Garbling



Hard garbling produced higher estimated reporting rates for every type of harassment, with the largest gains for physical and sexual harassment.

Conclusions

The research demonstrates that hard garbling, previously validated only in theory and laboratory settings, can work under live organizational conditions. The findings suggest that organizations could use the approach to surface cultural problems before they escalate into costly or unmanageable crises. Beyond harassment, hard garbling could be used to help leaders and organizations elicit sensitive information on topics such as worker safety or product quality.

The findings also carry an important nuance for leaders considering how to use the method. Hard garbling is not well suited to investigating a specific suspicion or building a case against an individual under scrutiny. Its value lies in repeated, company- or team-wide use, where it can reveal the prevalence and scope of a problem before it becomes severe. Leaders should treat it as an early-detection tool for understanding the scale of an issue, rather than as a mechanism for gathering evidence in a targeted investigation.

Read the full working paper:

Monitoring Harassment in Organizations

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