

RESEARCH NOTE

Abstract

A trusted reporting and response process is only one piece of a comprehensive Counter-Insider Threat Program. Employees should also feel motivated and be incentivized to monitor and mitigate their own concerning behavior, especially if it interferes with the overall well-being of the organization. “Maybe It’s Me” is a visual campaign designed to address this difficult topic in a non-confrontational manner and encourage both self-awareness and self-improvement to benefit individuals and organizations.



About The Threat Lab

The Defense Personnel and Security Research Center (PERSEREC) founded The Threat Lab in 2018 to realize the Department of Defense (DoD) Counter-Insider Threat Program Director’s vision to incorporate the social and behavioral sciences into the mission space. Our team is headquartered in Seaside, California, and includes psychologists, sociologists, policy analysts, computer scientists, and other subject matter experts committed to workforce protection.

“Maybe It’s Me”—A Visual Campaign To Encourage Self-Awareness & Self-Improvement in the Workforce

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Introduction

Counterproductive work behavior (CWB) is unethical targeted behavior conducted by employees who intend to harm their coworkers or their organizations (Workplace Bullying Institute, 2021; Bowling et al., 2020). What employees may not realize, however, is that, by engaging in CWBs, they may set off a cycle in which they harm the organization, which in turn harms morale and motivates more people to engage in CWBs. Ultimately, this cycle may result in an insider threat incident such as espionage, sabotage, or workplace violence.

Counter-Insider Threat professionals work to interrupt this cycle by encouraging and enabling people to report any concerning behaviors they witness. However, reporting is insufficient on its own. A comprehensive Counter-Insider Threat Program should also motivate and incentivize self-awareness and self-improvement in order to prevent individual CWBs from creating a toxic organizational environment.

The National Insider Threat Task Force (NITTF) and the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence & Security (OUSD[I&S]) asked The Threat Lab, a program within the Defense Personnel and Security Research Center (PERSEREC), to develop a product for the general workforce that will increase self-awareness of CWBs and motivate positive change. In response, we created “Maybe It’s Me”, a non-confrontational, engaging visual campaign comprised of two infographics that address this challenging topic. These infographics identify CWBs that occur in physical and virtual workplaces, describe their effects on other people, and recommend constructive behavioral changes. This Research Note summarizes the foundational research on which the infographics are based and documents the development process.



Literature Review

We began with a comprehensive review of unclassified CWB literature. Given the size of this body of literature, we made a number of decisions to narrow the review without compromising the integrity of the process or the relevance of the outcome. In this section, we describe this multi-step process.

Types of Counterproductive Work Behavior

Based on the sponsor's preferences, we narrowed the scope of the literature review to focus specifically on CWBs that are directed at individuals (e.g., bullying) as opposed to those that are directed at organizations (e.g., sabotage). As shown in Table 1, we organized the results of the literature review into five broad categories: Workplace Incivility, Workplace Aggression/Violence, Bullying, Harassment, and Interpersonal Deviance.

Table 1: Counterproductive Work Behavior (CWB) Categories and Associated Behaviors

CWB	Sub-Behaviors
Workplace Incivility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Acting disrespectful or rude toward colleagues or subordinates ▪ Making rude, hypercritical, and harsh comments to an individual ▪ Undermining the image and performance of peers ▪ Bullying
Workplace Aggression/Violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Engaging in outbursts of anger ▪ Making threats ▪ Intimidating others ▪ Under-recognizing ▪ Inconsistent disciplinary procedures ▪ Electronically surveilling employees ▪ Harassment ▪ Bullying ▪ Domestic violence ▪ Emotional abuse ▪ Stalking ▪ Physical assault
Bullying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Mistreating others ▪ Criticizing others ▪ Blaming others ▪ Ostracizing others ▪ Humiliating others ▪ Joking ▪ Excessive monitoring of an employee ▪ Gossiping ▪ Specific remote behaviors: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Overworking individuals - Under-recognizing - Displaying rudeness toward others - Cyber-gossiping - Setting inappropriate boundaries - Inappropriate interactions
Harassment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Verbal harassment (i.e., engaging in unsolicited and explicit speech about race, sex, religion, belief, origin, age, genes, color, or ethnicity) ▪ Sexual harassment (i.e., engaging in inappropriate behaviors that are sexual in nature and create an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working environment)
Organizational Deviance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Stealing/theft ▪ Sabotaging others ▪ Withdrawing and putting little effort into work ▪ Using alcohol or drugs while on the job ▪ Engaging in fraud
Interpersonal Deviance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Engaging in conflict at work ▪ Verbally abusing a coworker ▪ Belittling others ▪ Pulling pranks on others ▪ Acting rudely ▪ Arguing ▪ Displaying personal or physical aggression ▪ Engaging in political deviance ▪ Social undermining ▪ Engaging in workplace violence ▪ Engaging in discrimination ▪ Making threats ▪ Showing hostility toward others

Note: Sources used to create this table are cited in the References list and marked with an asterisk (*).

We then selected a smaller subset of behaviors from Table 1 based on previous research. We know people tend to agree that criminal behavior, such as bringing a weapon or drugs to work, should be reported to the Counter-Insider Threat Program. There are other behaviors, however, that are less likely to be reported because it is unclear how much harm they cause (Jaros, 2017). Based on this research, we chose to focus on behaviors that fall into this gray zone; that is, people may not see them as problematic and therefore may not feel motivated or incentivized to make any changes. As a result, we removed from consideration behaviors such as stalking, domestic violence, and making threats.

Finally, given the COVID-19 pandemic and some organizations' decisions to allow full-time telework both now and in the future (Stoller, 2021), we wanted to highlight behaviors that may occur in physical and/or remote environments. As a result, we selected CWBs related to three categories in Table 1—bullying, workplace incivility, and interpersonal deviance. We specifically aimed to highlight in-person behaviors of gossiping, ostracism, and blaming and remote behaviors of cyber-gossiping, ostracism, and inappropriate interactions that humiliate others. Although gossiping/cyber-gossiping and ostracism overlap, these behaviors look very different in a physical setting compared to a virtual setting.

Effects of Counterproductive Work Behavior

According to self-awareness theory, people generally go about their day in one of two ways. Some people pay little to no attention to their inner selves and instead respond instinctively to situations as they arise. In contrast, other people consistently check in with their inner selves to ensure their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are aligned with their internal “standards of correctness” (Silvia & Duval, 2001, as cited in Ackerman, 2021, What is Self-Awareness Theory section). When people notice a discrepancy, they either work to correct it or they choose to ignore it. Often, people will choose the latter if the effort required to make a correction is greater than the reward. Therefore, if we want to motivate action, we need to increase the value of behavioral change. One way to do so is to highlight the effects of CWBs on other people (Ackerman, 2021).

The effects of CWBs vary depending on the specific behavior, but an influx and normalization of CWBs contributes to a toxic environment. Anjum and coauthors note that, “Toxic workplace environments induce repulsive experiences, which lead to the negative, adverse and reduced outcomes of the employees” (2018, p. 2). These individual outcomes include elevated levels of anxiety, stress, depression, health issues, absenteeism, and burnout. In short, toxic environments are characterized by poor performance, poor decision-making, and high levels of employee stress (Appelbaum et al., 2006), which, taken together, can compromise an organization's efficiency, productivity, and reputation.

How to Change from Counterproductive to Productive Work Behaviors

CWBs can be replaced with productive behaviors when an organization and its people commit to positive change (Appelbaum et al., 2006). One strategy is to maximize self-awareness, which empowers employees to proactively change their behavior and act morally (Ackerman, 2021). Based on best practices drawn from the literature review, we mapped each of the behaviors selected from Table 1 to their more positive, productive counterparts. For example, rather than ostracize talkative, opinionated colleagues and exclude them from meetings, invite them and set a clear agenda and discussion ground rules to guide and keep the conversation on track (Robinson et al., 2013).

Infographic Design and Development

Upon completion of the literature review, we discussed several types of products that encourage self-awareness and behavioral change in a non-confrontational and nonthreatening manner. Given the sensitivity of the topic, we chose to create infographics that could be consumed in private or as part of a solo-learning activity rather than as a team exercise. Here we describe how we developed these infographics.

Elements of an Infographic

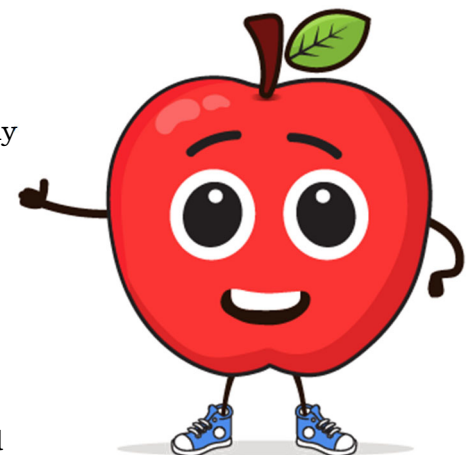
Infographics use data visualizations, illustrations, text, and images to tell a story in a unique way. To maximize effectiveness and in line with best practices, we focused on five infographic properties: immediacy, malleability, compellingness, resonance, and coherence (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2016).

The immediacy of an infographic relates to whether it evokes the audience's excitement, which can be achieved through both structure and layout. Malleability refers to whether the infographic inspires a personal experience for the audience and motivates them to interact with the content (e.g., through direct questions posed to encourage reflection). Compellingness is the degree to which the audience learns something from consuming the infographic, and resonance describes the audience's lasting connection to and impression of the infographic's story. Finally, coherence requires a credible message that the viewer can readily grasp, which requires logic, clarity, and consistency.

Look and Feel

The purpose of this project is not to stigmatize individuals or groups of people. Therefore, we intentionally excluded photographs or illustrations of people from the infographics. In this way, we avoided the risk of associating certain demographic groups, backgrounds, or body types with CWBs. Instead, we selected an inanimate object in an effort to broaden the appeal of the visual campaign. Specifically, we selected an apple.

In spite of the fact that few people join an organization with the intent to do harm (Jaros et al., 2019), employees who engage in CWBs are often labeled as “bad apples” by security professionals. Conversely, people who practice organizational citizenship behaviors are seen as “good apples.” These labels imply that there is something fundamentally fixed about people and that they will resist efforts to change because it is simply not in their nature. However, as Bolino and Klotz (2015) note, “Employees are seldom purely good or bad, nor is their behavior either wholly good or bad. Indeed, most employees do positive things while at work, and sometimes those same employees may also behave badly or unethically” (2015, p. 45). Because myths surrounding “bad apples” persist, we intentionally chose an apple character to counter the popular narrative and convey the importance of self-awareness and the possibility for behavioral change.



User Feedback

Once we completed drafts of the infographics, we solicited feedback on the content and message, tone, layout, and design from 13 subject matter experts in psychology, law enforcement, graphic design, and insider threat. We made a number of changes to the infographics as a result of their feedback. For example, we revised the language: to ensure a positive, encouraging tone rather than a

negative, judgmental tone; to ensure that the behavioral examples relate to the general workforce rather than to a specific subset (e.g., only managers); and to offer clear, productive alternatives to CWBs. We also made the apple slightly less cartoonish.

Infographic Format

We developed the infographics using Adobe Illustrator, with final versions available in 11x17 PDF file format. We encourage organizations to print and post them in their workspaces, embed them in annual training materials, and distribute them electronically as part of National Insider Threat Awareness Month every September.

Future Research

We designed the “Maybe It’s Me” campaign with the future in mind. Now that we have established the layout and design, we hope to address additional CWBs in future infographics to encourage ongoing self-improvement. We also propose two specific research projects based on the limitations we encountered in this project.

First, we designed this project for the general workforce, but the literature review revealed a number of CWBs specific to certain subgroups. For example, there is rich literature surrounding CWBs in the military, among organizational leaders, and within customer service professions such as healthcare and transportation. Future “Maybe It’s Me” campaigns could be targeted toward these and other subgroups.

Second, we have tried to motivate change based on the effect a person’s behavior has on others. As we learned in the literature review, CWBs also affect organizations as a whole because individual behavior aggregates into a toxic culture, which leads to increased turnover, decreased efficiency, and reputational damage. In reality, however, toxic cultures persist and many organizations disregard or even reward people who repeatedly engage in CWBs because these people make money for the organization or contribute technical expertise that is difficult to replace. Future research could address this difficult challenge by highlighting strategies to change an organization’s culture without compromising its expertise or profitability.

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