



An Open Letter to the TSA

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Dear TSA Management,

Today marks one year since Transportation Security Administration (TSA) officer Robert Henry jumped to his death from the tenth floor of the Hyatt hotel inside Orlando International Airport. Even though your investigation determined Henry was not targeted or bullied at work, **it's clear** that colleagues and superiors mistreated Henry, and that there is a long history at the Orlando airport and several others of harassment and abuse. Why else would Henry end an email he sent to his family and friends shortly before his death: "Tell my managers I'll be waiting for them in Hell"?

Last week I attended an **event** at the Orlando Public Library that discussed the incidents surrounding Henry's death and what has changed since then. The most notable change: you're rolling out suicide prevention training. As a management professor who has spent the past decade studying workplace mistreatment, I can tell you that your response is foolish and unlikely to make a real difference.

Your proposed solution addresses a symptom rather than the cause of the problem. The real problem—despite what your internal investigation concluded—is that employees and managers are free to engage in hostile, intimidating, and abusive behavior. Implementing suicide prevention training, then, is like scotchgarding your couch to prevent it from smelling of smoke while oblivious to the inferno ripping through your home. If you want to prevent future suicides, you should focus on the root cause of your troubles: your toxic work culture.

While suicide prevention training may help employees manage and cope with thoughts of self-harm, it is of little use for **all the other negative consequences** that result from workplace mistreatment. When employees are mistreated at work, they perform worse on the job, help coworkers less, and experience more problems at home. Their physical health declines. They miss more days of work. They burn out and quit their jobs. Abusive behavior costs organizations millions of dollars in lost productivity, employee turnover, and litigation. A single case of workplace abuse can cost more than \$25,000.

So what should you do? Decades' worth of organizational research offers "best practice" recommendations to transform an organization's culture from one where lying, insults, gossip, and exclusionary behavior rule to one where respectful and ethical behavior are the norm.

This sort of transformation needs to start at the top.

Research **shows** that leaders' behaviors can "trickle down" to affect the attitudes and actions of employees at lower organizational levels. Your toxic culture is understandable when you consider the example set by top officials, former Federal Security Director Jerry Henderson and second-in-command Deputy Federal Security Director Keith Jeffries. According to employees, these men ruled with fear and intimidation. When employees voiced concerns, they were reassigned to less desirable positions, transferred to other locations, or simply let go. You need top leaders who will promote appropriate behavior through their personal actions, their decision-making, and their communication. You need leaders who will set high standards for appropriate behavior and hold employees accountable to them.

But cultural change is not as simple as replacing the chief. You must also create and enforce formal policies like codes of conduct, put in place systems that reward good behavior, and train employees to act with integrity and kindness.

A recent study **found** that training supervisors to be fair, mindful, and sincere helps them become more supportive and less abusive. Perhaps most important, your **core values**—integrity, respect, commitment—have to permeate every aspect of organizational life. They must be reflected in the language that employees use, in the stories they tell, and in the norms that guide everyday behavior. Otherwise, your employees will come to believe the corporate credo is just a wall decoration for executive offices.

Robert Henry's death was tragic. And entirely preventable. But your decision to implement suicide prevention training will not prevent future tragedies. If you don't change your toxic culture, your problems will live on—but, despite the new training, your employees may not.

Sincerely,

Shannon