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Workplace Bullying

What is Workplace Bullying?

Bullying involves a pattern of repeated hostile verbal and non-verbal interactions that are generally non-physical and directed at a target resulting in a negative impact on the target's sense of self as a competent worker or person. Bullying behaviors range from subtle (e.g., cutting off communication) to observable (e.g., teasing and anger outbursts) however, may also include the absence of certain behaviors such as not providing support and information. Bullying is distinct from conflict where the parties involved have equal power. A power imbalance whether formal as in job position or informal as in having some form of economic, psychological, social or status power over an individual is involved in bullying. Although a one-time behavior can be very damaging, most would not consider this to be bullying. To be considered bullying, behaviors should have occurred repeatedly. The province of Québec is the only province in Canada to have legislation about bullying, which is referred to as 'psychological harassment.' The requirements for legal consideration include vexatious (repeated) behavior, behaviors seen as hostile and unwanted, that affect a person's dignity, and represent a harmful work environment (Commission des Normes du Travail, 2004). Bullying is not about someone having a bad day or a few bad days and it is not about conflict between peers. It is about the persistent and repeated targeting of an individual with the goal of harming them or their work.

How Does Bullying Affect a Person?

Bullying is associated with negative health outcomes such as anxiety, depression, headache, and musculoskeletal problems. Research on the organizational impact of bullying shows that bullying results in lower levels of job satisfaction, greater expulsion from the labor market, lower commitment and higher perceived levels of injustice and unfairness, increased absenteeism, and turnover and intention to leave. These consequences also apply to witnesses and bystanders. A study found that those who witnessed bullying reported higher levels of anxiety than those who had not experienced or witnessed bullying and one in five of those who witnessed bullying considered leaving their organizations because of witnessing bullying.

What is the Cost of Bullying?

Researchers estimate that bullying costs organizations billions of dollars through absenteeism, turnover, and legal actions. The most recent and robust research on economic cost has been conducted in the UK. Researchers there estimated the following costs related to bullying absenteeism: £3.06 billion; turnover: £1.55 billion, productivity: £9.14 billion; for a total cost of £13.7 billion. In addition, when bullying occurs, the reputation of an organization can be harmed.

What Leads to Bullying?

Three broad factors are associated with the emergence of bullying in a workplace:

- a) Characteristics of individuals including the need to protect self-esteem through the use of aggression, lack of social competencies (e.g. poor anger management, lack of self-reflection and perspective taking), and political behavior intended to enhance a person's own goals and status.
- b) Social factors such as "getting even." It is well noted that there is a link between perceptions of unfair treatment and workplace violence and bullying in particular.
- c) Features of the organization including workplace change resulting in increased pressure for production; poor work organization that leads to conflict/ambiguity among work roles; an organizational culture that enables negative behavior; and poor leadership (e.g., autocratic, abusive, laissez-faire).

Organizational Management of Bullying

This plan starts with acknowledgement of bullying and mobbing as a potential organizational risk and continues with the development of a strategic plan to identify and monitor progress toward a respectful workplace. Senior leadership owns the problem as a potential organizational problem. Senior leadership invests in policy development and training for leaders, HR personnel, and employees. Senior leadership provides resources to their leaders and employees including provision of leadership coaches,

Employee Assistance Programs, and mediators. Occupational Health (OH) and HR provide readily accessible information about all other resources such as Human Rights tribunals, legal advice, and support lines. Senior leaders, OH, and HR maintain healthy networks with professionals – they take time to meet with and discuss issues with these professionals. All leaders and employees demonstrate a zero tolerance attitude toward any form of disrespect. The organization selects all levels of employees including senior positions, for integrity. Respectful behavior is measured and rewarded. Processes for informal and formal complaint resolution are in place and widely disseminated to employees. In the fully responsive organization, the actual incidence of bullying and mobbing is low and dealt with immediately in a supportive manner to all parties involved.

The biggest mistakes people make in dealing with allegations of bullying are confusing it with lesser behavior, not taking it seriously or not following up on a complaint because they perceive it as interpersonal conflict. When you do this, you're effectively communicating to employees that this behavior will be tolerated in the organization -- you're telling employees, "Go figure it out for yourself." This often leads to requests for formal investigations or legal actions.

10 Critical Mistakes Made by Managers That Can Lead to Bullying

Critical Mistake #1 – Failing to Set Clear Expectations or to Regularly Reinforce Them

Smart Move #1 – Make a list of performance and behavioral expectations for your staff overall and specifically for individuals as their jobs require. Update your list regularly as new issues emerge or the work environment changes. Scrupulously require your staff to attend mandatory training (Such matters as financial responsibility, ethics, sexual harassment, etc.). Personally meet with the entire staff to go over the staff list at least semiannually. Meet with individuals semiannually to go over the unique expectations applicable to them. Keep a record of each meeting, who attended, and if someone missed the overall staff issues, schedule a makeup meeting just for them.

Critical Mistake #2 – Letting Problems You're Aware of Fester before Addressing Them

Smart Move #2 – Do not assume people are self-correcting. The judgment it takes to distinguish what is a problem and what is not is exactly what should be screened for in supervisor selection. In addition, mentoring new supervisors for fit in an organization should address such issues.

Critical Mistake #3 – Failure to Communicate With People with Problems

Smart Move #3 – Fight the urge to avoid those staff members that are difficult to deal with, annoying, marginally productive or who possess similarly unpleasant attributes. I believe supervisory-employee alienation is a prime factor in a deteriorating relationship that reduces greatly a supervisor's willingness to address issues. Know what each staff member is working on. Keep up with their progress. Listen to their concerns.

Critical Mistake #4 – Failure to Recognize the Importance of Due Process

Smart Move #4 – Get training on what happens when an employee problem must be formally addressed.

Critical Mistake #5 – Taking the Matter Personally

Smart Move #5 – Cultivate an attitude of objectivity in dealing with problematic employee behavior. Paternalism, favoritism and condescension are not only vile to observe but fly directly into the face of the concept of individual dignity and self worth. A supervisor owes an employee the opportunity:

- To hear what management believes is unacceptable behavior directly;
- To get guidance on the way the organization wants the individual to behave;
- To be offered (in most cases) an opportunity to demonstrate acceptable behavior
- To decide for him or herself how to proceed and to face the consequences of that decision.

Critical Mistake #6 – Moving Too Quickly to Formal Action

Smart Move #6 – Work a problem informally whenever possible. If we see in the person an apparently sincere desire to improve then use informal, non-disciplinary approaches whenever possible.

Critical Mistake #7 – Playing "GOTCHA" With Troublesome or Difficult People

Smart Move #7 – Treat everyone equitably and fairly. Let the appropriate processes work. Some supervisors see a serious employee mistake as an opportunity to rid themselves of a "problem employee" rather than the opportunity to help an individual work out their "employment problems".

Critical Mistake #8 – Waiting Too Long to Get Professional Help

Smart Move #8 – Make sure you know your servicing employee relations specialist or human resources advisor. If you see a problem developing, do not hesitate to discuss it with that person. These specialists see many problems and their job is to help you get through them.

Critical Mistake #9 – Unwillingness to See a Problem Through to a Resolution

Smart Move #9 – Generally discipline is required to be progressive. Employee problem solving is a process.

Critical Mistake #10 – Worrying Too Much About Over-Touted Disincentives to Taking Action

Smart Move #10 – Do the right thing. Don't hesitate to proceed with dealing with misconduct if what you're worried about includes: *What if they file a discrimination claim? What do I do if they get hostile and aggressive? Don't I have to treat each employee exactly the same? What if they go to the union?*

Bullying Behaviors Include:

- Making gestures that seek to intimidate, engaging in reprisals.
- Discrediting the person: spreading rumors, ridiculing humiliating, calling convictions or private life into question shouting abuse at him or sexually harassing him
- Belittling the person: forcing to perform tasks that are below skills, simulating professional misconduct
- Preventing the person from expressing themselves
- Threats, constant interruptions
- Prohibiting a person from speaking to others
- Isolating the person: no longer talking to him at all, denying their presence, distancing from others
- Destabilizing the person: making fun of his convictions, his tastes and his political choices

These Behaviours

- Are repetitive
- Are hostile or unwanted
- Affect the person's dignity or psychological integrity
- Result in a harmful work environment

Recommended Books on Workplace Bullying

Davenport, Noa, Distler Schwartz, Ruth, Pursell Elliott, Gail *Mobbing: Emotional Abuse in the American Workplace* (1999, 2005 Third Edition) <http://www.mobbing-usa.com>

Field, Evelyn, (2010). *Bully Blocking at Work: A Self Help Guide for Managers and Mentors*, due for release Spring 2010 contact Evelyn Field at efield@bullying.com.au **STRONGLY RECOMMENDED READING**

Field, Tim *Bully in Sight: How to Predict, Resist, Challenge and Combat Workplace Bullying* (1996)

Hare, Robert & Babiak, Paul *Snakes in Suits: When Psychopaths Go to Work* (2006)

Namie, Gary and Ruth *The Bully at Work: What You Can Do to Stop the Hurt and Reclaim Your Dignity on the Job* (2000)

Risk Factors for Workplace Bullying

- > Lack of respect between persons
- > Conflicts that are not managed properly or not managed at all
- > Envy, jealousy or rivalry
- > The absence of communication between the employer and employees and between employees
- > Excessive competition
- > Ambiguity or lack of precision concerning the tasks that are to be performed
- > Unfair distribution of the work load
- > Lack of training or coaching when technological changes are made
- > Inadequate work tools
- > Denying the possible existence of psychological harassment

Treating the Bully

Those identified as engaging in negative workplace behaviors must be managed due to the destruction they cause to individuals and organizations. Some bullies are unaware of their impact and a frank discussion from a superior indicating performance appraisal implications may be all that is needed. If an individual does not respond to this, then a formal coaching process from a psychologist versed in bullying behaviors should be initiated. If the individual does not respond to this, then a performance management process should be started. Most bullies are capable of moderating their behavior if they understand that non-compliance will result in progressive discipline up to and including termination.

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Bullying Websites

www.bullying.org

www.mobbing.ca

www.bullybusters.org

<http://www.nobullyforme.org/>

<http://www.jfo.org.uk/>

<http://www.peerabuse.info/>

www.kickbullying.com

<http://www.minkhollow.ca/bullying.html>



Medical and Psychological Management of Targets of Workplace Bullying

The impact of workplace bullying can range from mild reactions such as mild anxiety and depressed mood, minor changes in coping capacity to severe psychological trauma, depending on the severity and duration of behaviors experienced. Early intervention is critical to prevent the onset of moderate and severe symptoms. Psychological treatments such as education and support, stress management, and cognitive behavior therapy are generally helpful for early stage reactions. As bullying behaviors escalate or persist, the impact will be stronger and anxiety and mood disorders may develop requiring treatment with medication in conjunction with counseling. If the behaviors experienced have been extensive and prolonged then psychological trauma may develop and may resemble a brain injury – inability to make good decisions, inability to use logic, inability to learn and grow, hypervigilance, paranoia, and obsessive compulsive behaviors. Supportive therapy and support groups coupled with medication may be helpful. It is critical that a therapist experienced in treating targets of bullying provide counseling.

Those who treat the targets of bullying generally find that targets go through different stages in healing from their experiences. Evelyn Field suggests these stages are typical of recovery from bullying:

- The initial impact: experiences of anger, helplessness, trauma, fear
- The unsuccessful attempt to stop the bullying: attempts to enlist management, HR supervisors
- The search for validation and justice: venting to co-workers, filing complaints, seeking legal advice and redress
- Identifying and dealing with injuries: seeking support and therapy
- Acceptance of bullying experience
- Mourning of losses (i.e. reputation, job, health, perspective on the world)
- Becoming a survivor, thriving again

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