

Bullying in the Workplace

Employers are beginning to take steps to make bullying as unthinkable as sexual harassment or drunkenness in the workplace.

Schoolyard bullying – the torment of one child by another – is often compared to workplace bullying. Both types represent a grab for control by an insecure, inadequate person, an exercise of power through the humiliation of the target. School bullies, if reinforced by cheering classmates, fearful teachers or ignoring administrators, grow up to be dominating adults. When they join the work force, they continue to bully others.

Psychological Violence

A 1999 International Labour Organization (ILO) report on workplace violence emphasized that physical and emotional violence is one of the most serious problems facing the workplace in the new millennium. The ILO definition of workplace violence includes bullying:

p. p. “any incident in which a person is abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances relating to their work. These behaviors would originate from customers, co-workers at any level of the organization. This definition would include all forms of harassment, bullying, intimidation, physical threats/assaults, robbery and other intrusive behaviors.”

CUPE’s National Health and Safety Survey of Aggression Against Staff, published in January, 1994, mentions verbal aggression and harassment in its definition of violence:

p. p. “Any incident in which an employee is abused, threatened or assaulted during the course of his/her employment. This includes the application of force, threats with or without weapons, severe verbal abuse and persistent sexual and racial harassment.”

Bullying (general harassment) is far more prevalent than other destructive behaviors covered by legislation, such as sexual harassment and racial discrimination.

A Canadian survey on workplace violence found that physical violence is often reported from outside sources, such as customers, students and patients. Psychological violence is more often reported from within the organization. A U.S. study estimates 1 in 5 American workers has experienced destructive bullying in the past year.

Workplace Policies Needed

On April 6, 1999, a former employee of OC Transpo in Ottawa went on a shooting rampage that left four employees dead, then took his own life. The killer had himself been the victim of workplace harassment.

Among the recommendations of a coroner’s inquest was that the definition of workplace violence should include not only physical violence but also psychological violence such as bullying, mobbing, teasing, ridicule or any other act or words that could psychologically hurt or isolate a person in the workplace.

No jurisdiction in Canada requires employers to have a workplace violence prevention program. For that reason, the OC Transpo jury recommended that federal and provincial governments enact legislation to prevent workplace violence and that employers develop policies to address violence and harassment.

Perpetrators and Targets

Over 72 per cent of bullies are bosses, some are co-workers and a minority bully higher-ups. A bully is equally likely to be a man or a woman.

The common stereotype of a bullied person is someone who is weak, an oddball or a loner. On the contrary, the target chosen by an adult bully will very often be a capable, dedicated staff member, well liked by co-workers. Bullies are most likely to pick on people with an ability to cooperate and a non-confrontative interpersonal style. The bully considers their capability a threat, and determines to cut them down.

Profile of a Bully

Adult bullies, like their schoolyard counterparts, tend to be insecure people with poor or non-existent social skills and little empathy. They turn this insecurity outwards, finding satisfaction in their ability to attack and diminish the capable people around them.

A workplace bully subjects the target to unjustified criticism and trivial fault-finding. In addition, he or she humiliates the target, especially in front of others, and ignores, overrules, isolates and excludes the target.

If the bully is the target's superior, he or she may: set the target up for failure by setting unrealistic goals or deadlines, or denying necessary information and resources; either overload the target with work or take all work away (sometimes replacing proper work with demeaning jobs); or increase responsibility while removing authority.

Regardless of specific tactics, the intimidation is driven by the bully's need to control others.

The Burden of Bullying

Bullied employees waste between 10 and 52 per cent of their time at work. Research shows they spend time defending themselves and networking for support, thinking about the situation, being demotivated and stressed, not to mention taking sick leave due to stress-related illnesses.

Bullies poison their working environment with low morale, fear, anger, and depression. The employer pays for this in lost efficiency, absenteeism, high staff turnover, severance packages and law suits. In extreme cases, a violent incident may be the tragic outcome.

The target's family and friends also suffer the results of daily stress and eventual breakdown. Marriages suffer or are destroyed under the pressure of the target's anxiety and anger. Friendships cool because the bullied employee becomes obsessive about the situation.

Moreover, our health care system ends up repairing the damage: visits to the doctor for symptoms of stress, prescriptions for antidepressants, and long term counseling or psychiatric care. In this sense, we all pay.

Prevention

Workplace bullies create a tremendous liability for the employer by causing stress-related health and safety problems, and driving good employees out of the organization.

The business case for strict anti-bullying policies is compelling. Potential benefits include a more peaceful and productive workplace, with better decision making, less time lost to sick leave or self-defensive paperwork, higher staff retention, and a lower risk of legal action.

Identify bullying in your staff handbook as unacceptable behavior. Establish proper systems for investigating, recording and dealing with conflict. Investigate complaints quickly, while maintaining discretion and confidentiality and protecting the rights of all individuals involved. It is important to understand fully any incidence of bullying and take the problem seriously at all levels.

Organizations who manage people well outperform those who don't by 30 to 40 per cent. Development of strong interpersonal skills at all levels is fundamental to good management and a healthy workplace.

There is no place for bullies in a well-run organization.