

FROM THE PLAYGROUND TO THE WORKPLACE, BULLYING HAPPENS BECAUSE IT'S ALLOWED

Understanding bullying in the workplace

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The University's Harassment Policy and Procedures includes abuses of power and threats and intimidation in its definitions of personal harassment. For the past three years more than half (50 to 60) of the complaints received annually in the Office for the Prevention of Discrimination and Harassment at UVic have been related to personal harassment. This type of harassment has not been widely addressed in policies elsewhere and is not as newsworthy as sexual harassment--although some research on "bullying" has been done in Great Britain.

Harassment or "bullying" at work is about persistent personal abuse which humiliates and demeans the individual. Sometimes it is called a personality clash, strong management, or an attitude problem. It is behaviour that is too often condoned even if colleagues disapprove and it creates a hostile, fearful environment.

It is my experience that the impact on individuals experiencing personal harassment is similar to sexual harassment. The following characteristics of bullying behaviour are drawn both from external studies and internal complaints:

"When I couldn't meet his request, he yelled and swore at me. He's done this before."

The person targeted for this behaviour felt shock and had anxiety about future interactions. Yelling and using profanity is a type of blatant verbal and emotional abuse and is often unpredictable and irrational. The individual being bullied may be vulnerable, coming back to work following bereavement or prolonged absence or be seen as "different" because of race, disability, timidity, sexual orientation etc. Verbal and emotional abuse undermines self-confidence and morale and productivity drops. It can lead to stress related symptoms and those targeted may find themselves wanting to quit to escape or fabricating reasons to stay away from work.

Other obvious bullying behaviours:

- Public humiliation
- Personal insults and name-calling
- Persistent criticism
- Spreading malicious rumours
- Freezing out, ignoring or excluding
- Constantly undervaluing effort

"Not only would they not talk to me, but became aggressive and punitive with anyone who did. I found out from others that they were spreading malicious rumours about me."

This employee felt alienated and abused by the behaviour of her colleagues and disheartened by the inaction of others in the department. Although this behaviour may seem obvious, many activities of the bullies were conducted in a subtle and devious manner. In addition to the cold shoulder, her point of

view was either not listened to or belittled. People whose confidence and self-esteem have been exposed to subtle, devious harassment find it immensely difficult to confront the bullies. It can also be difficult for others to identify such behaviour. Men and women enduring less obvious bullying can feel confused, even paranoid, because of the unpredictability and irrationality of the behaviour. They can use up emotional and mental resources trying to figure out what's going on and how to defend themselves.

Harassment or bullying often starts or intensifies during a period of change, such as a new Chair or manager or a new colleague who is strong and competent. It is related to the way a person has learned to influence or dominate people and to the values expressed by institutional practices. People who are high achievers, are successful, have higher qualifications, are more efficient, have superior social skills, have good looks, or are more creative are more likely to be the targets of bullies. The root of bullying behaviour is often insecurity and personal envy of the targeted individual.

With a group of people, there may be a "ringleader" with others in the workplace condoning or engaging in similar behaviour. They may do so to keep safe or to stay out of trouble with the leader. If you support the target, you may attract the same treatment.

Other less obvious bullying behaviours

- Removing areas of responsibility
- Deliberately sabotaging or impeding work performance
- Refusing to delegate
- Constantly changing work guidelines
- Withholding necessary information
- Over-monitoring, especially with malicious intent
- Setting up individuals to fail - eg. impossible deadlines
- Blocking applications for leave, promotion
- Using lengthy memos to make wild and inaccurate accusations
- Instigating complaints from others to make individual appear incompetent

"My supervisor nit-picked at everything and turned simple requests into bureaucratic nightmares. I felt like I was under constant scrutiny. On more than one occasion I received a memo from her indicating time limits for tasks down to the minute!"

This employee was frustrated and exhausted and eventually lost time at work because of stress symptoms. This type of over-monitoring and over-control is an intimidating tactic. The bully may be unaware of their behaviour and blind to its impact on others. Or, they may be attempting to gain personal power and domination of others from intentionally aggressive and devious behaviour. The harmful behaviour can increase when the bully is under increased pressure to perform as their sense of inadequacy increases.

Men and women who bully need to control others resulting in difficulty in delegating, trusting others, and sharing information. They see this as a loss of control. They blame everyone but themselves using selective memories and twisting the truth to their own advantage. They can have "dual" personalities, able to charm some and still be tyrannical with others, usually subordinates. Because of this, people being bullied have difficulty being believed by those who have been charmed.

In 1994 a survey commissioned by the BBC for Business was carried out by Staffordshire University involving 1137 working adults (48 per cent women and 52 per cent men) enrolled part-time at Staffordshire University. Of those surveyed, 78 per cent had witnessed bullying at work, 50 per cent

were bullied themselves and most were bullied by their managers. Of the men bullied, 87 per cent were bullied by men, of the women bullied 45 per cent were bullied by men and 55 per cent by women. Most were bullied as part of a group with 19 per cent responding they were singled out and bullied. Of those who responded they had been bullied, 40 per cent did nothing about it and 27 per cent left their jobs because of it. Of those who complained, 35 per cent reported that the bullying stopped.

What to do?

1. Increase your understanding and awareness of personal harassment/bullying and signs that it might be occurring (absenteeism, turnover, complaints).
2. If you think you are being bullied, talk to someone you trust, your union steward, manager or Chair. You can call the Office for the Prevention of Discrimination and Harassment (8488).
3. Document what is happening to you, what happened and how you felt. This can combat the confusion you may feel and help you to "see the forest."
4. If more than one person is being bullied, make a collective complaint. A group complaint is more difficult to dismiss as untrue.
5. If you are going to confront the bully, focus on the unacceptable behaviour rather than attacking the person. Help them understand the situations in which the behaviour occurs and the impact on others. Individual counselling may be recommended.
6. If someone tells you about being bullied, take their complaints seriously.
7. If you are unsure of who is telling the truth, ask: Who always needs to be right? Who criticizes the other in public? Whose behaviour is irrational and unpredictable? Who has the selective memory? Who fails to take any responsibility for their behaviour? Who feels damaged?
8. If you are in a position of authority and believe someone is being bullied, intervene early and continue to consistently monitor the problem.
9. Create expectations of behaviours and procedures which reduce bullying, stressing cooperation, mutual support, and minimizing aggression.
10. **Courage. From the playground to the workplace, bullying happens because it is allowed. Courage on the part of those who can take action is vital.**

References:

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