

Workplace Bullying and Disruptive Behavior:

What Everyone Needs to Know

What is workplace bullying and who is affected?

Workplace bullying refers to *repeated*, unreasonable actions of individuals (or a group) directed towards an employee (or a group of employees), which are intended to intimidate, degrade, humiliate, or undermine; or which create a risk to the health or safety of the employee(s).

Workplace bullying often involves an abuse or misuse of power. Bullying behavior creates feelings of defenselessness and injustice in the target and undermines an individual's right to dignity at work.

Bullying is different from aggression. Whereas aggression may involve a single act, bullying involves repeated attacks against the target, creating an *on-going pattern* of behavior. "Tough" or "demanding" bosses are not necessarily bullies as long as they are respectful and fair and their primary motivation is to obtain the best performance by setting high yet reasonable expectations for working safely. Workplace bullying can be instigated by coworkers, supervisors, contract workers, or labor representatives.

Some bullying situations involve employees bullying their peers, rather than a supervisor bullying an employee. The term **mobbing** refers to a group of coworkers targeting another worker. Supervisors should intervene immediately to address and stop mobbing behaviors.

In a prevalence study of U.S. workers, 41.4% of respondents reported experiencing psychological aggression at work in the past year representing

47 million U.S. workers (Schat, Frone & Kelloway, 2006). The research found that 13%, or nearly 15 million workers, reported experiencing psychological aggression on a weekly basis.

Examples of bullying:

- Unwarranted or invalid criticism
- Blame without factual justification
- Being treated differently than the rest of your work group
- Being sworn at
- Exclusion or social isolation
- Being shouted at or being humiliated
- Excessive monitoring or micro-managing
- Being given work unrealistic deadlines

What is corporate/institutional bullying?

Corporate/institutional bullying occurs when bullying is entrenched in an organization and becomes accepted as part of the workplace culture.

Corporate/institutional bullying can manifest itself in different ways:

- Placing unreasonable expectations on employees, where failure to meet those expectations means making life unpleasant (or dismissing) anyone who objects.
- Dismissing employees suffering from stress as "weak" while completely ignoring or denying potential work-related causes of the stress.
- Encouraging employees to fabricate complaints about colleagues with promises of promotion or threats of discipline.

Signs of corporate and institutional bullying include:

- Failure to meet organizational goals.
- Increased frequencies of grievances, resignations, and requests for transfers.
- Increased absence due to sickness.
- Increased disciplinary actions.

If you are aware of bullying in the workplace and do not take action, then you are accepting a share of the responsibility for any future abuses. This means that witnesses of bullying behavior should be encouraged to report any such incidences. Individuals are less likely to engage in antisocial behavior when it is understood that the organization does not tolerate such behavior and that the aggressor is likely to be punished.

Factors that Increase the Risk for Bullying Behavior:

- Significant organizational change (i.e., major internal restructuring, technological change).
- Worker characteristics (e.g., age, gender, parental status, apprentice or trainee).
- Workplace relationships (e.g., inadequate information flow between organizational levels, lack of employee participation in decisions).
- Work systems (e.g., lack of policies about behavior, high rate and intensity of work, staff shortages, interpersonal conflict, organizational constraints, role ambiguity, and role conflict).

How bullying affects people:

Targets of bullying experience significant physical and mental health problems:

- Reduced self-esteem
- Musculoskeletal problems
- Work withdrawal and sickness absence
- Sleep and digestive disturbances
- Increased depression/self-blame
- Family tension and stress

- High stress, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Financial problems due to absence

How bullying affects organizations:

Each of the individual consequences listed above can be very costly for the organization. Costs of bullying generally fall into three categories:

1. Replacing staff members that leave as a result of being bullied, cost of training new employees.
2. Work effort being displaced as staff cope with bullying incidents (i.e., effort being directed away from work productivity and towards coping).
3. Costs associated with investigations of ill treatment, potential legal action and loss of company reputation.

Bullies do not run good organizations; staff turnover and sick leave will be high while morale and productivity will be low. Stress, depression and physical health problems result in time away from work that is costly in terms of workers' compensation and lost productivity.

The health problems experienced by targets of bullying result in a sense of helplessness and negative emotional states. Low self-esteem and a negative organizational climate suppress creativity and hamper employees' abilities to respond to difficult situations or challenging goals.

The breakdown of trust in a bullying environment may mean that employees will fail to contribute their best work, do not give extra ideas for improvement, do not provide feedback on failures and may be less honest about performance.

What can be done about bullying?

At the first sign of conflict check if your company has a workplace violence program or a code of conduct that addresses psychological intimidation

and aggression that is not based on a protected characteristic/status. It can be useful to talk to the aggressor if you are comfortable with that. The

person may deny the aggression, but you have to let them know that you are aware and consider it unprofessional. Or talk with someone you absolutely trust in the workplace that can advise you and advocate for you while keeping your situation confidential.

What can you do about bullying?

Employees

Regain control:

- Recognize that you are being bullied.
- Realize that you are NOT the source of the problem.
- Recognize that bullying is about control, and therefore has nothing to do with your performance.

Take action:

- Keep a diary detailing the nature of the bullying (e.g., dates, times, places, what was said or done and who was present).
- Obtain copies of harassing / bullying paper trails; hold onto copies of documents that contradict the bully's accusations against you (e.g., time sheets, audit reports, etc.).

Other actions:

- Expect the bully to deny and perhaps misconstrue your accusations; have a witness with you during any meetings with the bully; report the behavior to an appropriate person.

Employers:

- Create a zero tolerance anti-bullying policy. This policy should be part of the wider commitment to a safe and healthful working environment and

should have the full support of top management.

- When witnessed or reported, the bullying behavior should be addressed IMMEDIATELY.
- If bullying is entrenched in the organization, complaints need to be taken seriously and investigated promptly. Reassignment of the bully may be necessary.
- Structure the work environment to incorporate a sense of autonomy, individual challenge/mastery, and clarity of task expectations for employees.
- Include employees in decision-making processes.
- Hold awareness campaigns for EVERYONE on what bullying is. Encourage reporting.
- Ensure management has an active part in the staff they supervise, rather than being far removed from them.
- Encourage open door policies.
- Investigate the extent and nature of the problem.
- Conduct employee attitude surveys.
- Improve management's ability and sensitivity towards dealing with and responding to conflicts.
- Establish an independent contact for employees (e.g., Human Resources contact).

This document was adapted from the Safety & Health Assessment and Research for Prevention (SHARP) Program at the Washington State Department of Labor & Industries. SHARP's partnered with business and labor to identify industry wide hazards and develop sensible, effective solutions to eliminate those hazards.

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