

Don't Be Bullied at Work

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Recently two men made the news, Omar Thornton and Kevin Morrissey. Omar and Kevin were strangers to each other and they led very different lives. One lived in Connecticut the other lived in Virginia. One worked driving truck and the other was a managing editor for an award-winning Virginia Quarterly Review. What do these two very different individuals have in common? Omar Thornton and Kevin Morrissey both committed suicide within weeks of each other at their workplaces stirring speculation of workplace bullying. Without these two individuals it is impossible to make a determination if workplace bullying was the reason behind their deaths. Omar's and Kevin's voices are forever silenced. How could that be, some may question why someone would not have reported it if it were true? Another term used in conjunction with workplace bullying to describe this phenomenon is also known as the "silent epidemic." Again, some may ask why would anyone be silent? There are many reasons why employees are silent?

It is not uncommon for even the target to not recognize the subtle signs at first; most of what happens initially happens covertly. I have heard so many say to me they knew something was not right but they could not put their finger on it.

Fear is perhaps the number one reason why most targets do not speak out, most employees need their jobs, the need to pay the mortgage, put food on the table and pay their bills, they do not see any other options for them but to stick it out. Some targets are getting close to retirement age; they are vested so they will force themselves to continue,

What are the signs of bullying in the workplace? There are many tactics bullies use in the workplace; it would be impossible for me to list them all, I will list a few that should raise a red flag for you.

Your work is never good enough for the boss, you are being put under the microscope, the criticism is petty and feels like it is more personal based than work related.

Your bully is arbitrary and capricious; he or she seems to have a personal agenda all the time.

Coworkers are not socializing with the target, they keep their distance, and the target is isolated.

Lack of information forthcoming about your job sabotages your ability to do the job, I have known bullies to actually physically take over the targets workstation and occupy it for half an hour while socializes with other supervisors.

Targets who have had excellent evaluations suddenly have an unsatisfactory evaluation, their reputation was under attack.

Target suddenly being notified they are going to a meeting and then being led to human resources. The target is alone behind closed doors to face more than one of management. This is the time when targets are the most vulnerable to threats and intimidation.

Bullying in the workplace is psychological violence, it is intended to malign, humiliate and degrade; to strip the target of their dignity, to undermine the targets reputation.

What is the bias against targets that contributes to allowing the silent epidemic to continue?

- They are not believed.
- They are blamed for provoking the bully.
- Targets get branded as troublemakers.

Why would a bully target an employee?

- An employee who is bright and creative, intuitive can make the bully feel threatened.
- An employee's competencies make the bully feel threatened.
- An employee who possesses social skills makes the bully feel threatened.
- An employee with high ethics, a whistleblower, makes the bully feel threatened.

These are a few of the physical symptoms a target might experience from being bullied at work:

- You throw up the night before work.
- You begin to feel anxious at work.
- Everyone is fed up with you obsessing about work at home.
- Your doctor tells you to change jobs because of blood pressure and health problems.
- Days off are spent exhausted and lifeless, all desire is lost.
- You begin to believe that you provoked the workplace cruelty

Some may choose to look for another job, according to the national WBI U.S. Workplace Bullying Survey of 2007, 40% of targets quit, 24% of the targets get fired, 13% of the targets ask to transfer. The largest population of bullies is made up of bosses.

Bullies wear uniforms, suits, skirts, jeans, high heels; 72% are bosses, and 18% are peers and 10% from the bottom up. Bullies are masters at masking their darker side.

Some work with the sick, the elderly in nursing homes and some work children or in our universities with our young men and women, some work in the service field, in finance, in our cities and towns.

Bullying in the workplaces does not discriminate.

There are so many books today about bullying in the workplace, websites to go to, I personally would recommend everyone learn about the impact this has not only on the employees but also on the economy and health care.

No one escapes the cost of a bully, we all pick up the tab when we buy a product or service, when we shop in our stores or seek medical help. Bullies are in some of our health care facilities. Bullies are in our schools and universities. There are some bullies in our law enforcement, in some of our fire stations. There are some bullies in our corporations, nonprofits and businesses.

Bullying rivals domestic violence; the end result is the same. Workplace bullies seldom leave a bruise that can be seen. Bullies need control; they have mastered manipulations and some have mastered the art of playing the part of the victim. This is why bullies have been successful and have continued to deceive others. Bullies leave footprints behind, certainly high turnovers are but one of the footprints.

The cost of bullying in the United States was a contributing factor in the failure of our economy. Just the cost of health care alone cannot be measured in dollars and cents. It is estimated 45 percent of those 54 million will suffer health issues resulting from the stress, the lost of productivity and increased error rates resulting from the bullying increases the cost of goods and services, the cost of a high turnover resulting from bullying is astronomical. Bullies also harm the economy and everyone pays.

This Labor Day, I hope you will set aside some time to think about bullying; chances are you know someone who is being bullied or has been. Learn what bullies do.

Sherrill Gilbert lives in Barre. She is the VT State Coordinator for the Healthy Workplace Bill. For more information go to healthyworkplacebill.org and workplacebullying.org.