

Anti-Bullying Advocacy: An Unrealized EA Opportunity

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Journal of Employee Assistance

Third Quarter, 2003

The original plan for this article was to simply make readers aware that a U.S. and international movement exists to combat Workplace Bullying, a problem EA professionals routinely encounter. In short order, I will shed light on the phenomenon of Psychological Violence. However, the strategies for re-positioning EA services detailed in a recent *Journal* (2003, Vol. 1 No. 1) compel us to suggest that EA can best serve employer-customers by embracing workforce health advocacy as a unique niche or "brand." Solutions to the Workplace Bullying dilemma might partially define the "cause" for action that EA professionals are uniquely qualified to deliver to organizations.

The Phenomenon

The EAP counselor reader is familiar with individuals who present a host of stress-related complaints caused by work. We refer here to cases in which the employee identifies ongoing exploitative or abusive interactions with a boss or co-worker as the source of the stress. Remarkably, one in six U.S. workers suffers such relationships that damage their psychological health while eroding employer productivity.

We call the phenomenon Workplace Bullying when mistreatment is repeated, health-harming, and illegitimate. Bullying is a sub-lethal, non-physical form of violence -- psychological in both its execution and impact on targeted individuals (of those self-identified as bullied, 41% are clinically depressed, PTSD afflicts 30% of targeted women and 21% of men). Bullying's illegitimacy refers to the use of destructive interpersonal tactics that interfere with work getting done. That is, bullying undermines accomplishment of the employer's business interests. Bullies, or perpetrators, put their need to control others above the employer's genuine goals.

A minority of bullies choose to humiliate their targets in public settings. Though this *Screaming Mimi* is the stereotypical image of a bully, the coach Bobby Knight of the world, they are statistically rare. Witnessing co-workers readily give allegiance to the tyrant, driven by fear of being next. More dangerous and insidious is the family of tactics employed by a *Constant Critic* who distorts the performance appraisal process behind closed doors attempting to reconstruct the target's personality and competence. Critics are masters of plausible deniability; with no witnesses, they can lie about misconduct with impunity.

Most bullies at one time or another adopt duplicitous maneuvers. These *Two-Headed Snakes* terrorize their prey, but ingratiate themselves to higher-ranking people. Thus when the snake is eventually accused, the target is not believed. One federal agency executive refused to terminate an acknowledged division chief bully because "he's a great conversationalist and lunch buddy" even though he called us in to correct the problem. Executives support bullying managers either based on personal bonds, from having selected the hyperaggressive people to "shake up the unit," or from effective politicking by the pleasant, ingratiatory bully.

Complainants are not believed when they eventually complain. They are denigrated as "whiners," "thin-skinned," or "provocative and thus deserving." Adult targets of bullying are different than their schoolyard counterparts. Our research shows that targets are selected because of their refusal to be subservient (thus "insubordination" is the most frequent complaint about them (which should be nonconcern in contemporary, non-military organizations), their superior work or social skills that threaten the bully who lacks emotional intelligence, or their ethical whistleblowing.

Apologists for bullying spew a variety of glib justifications -- e.g., "that's why they call it work," "it's just tough management." Ashamed, bullied targets are primarily women (77%) whose assumptions have been shattered about a workplace that would not allow them to work safely without interference. In only a quarter of bullying cases would sexual or racial harassment apply.

Employer liability reduction or avoidance prompts responsiveness to reported bullying but only when complainants enjoy "protected status" as defined by federal or state anti-discrimination laws. If perpetrators and targets of harassment are both "protected" or the target is not a member of one of the special groups, then laws do not apply. Even though the misconduct is verified and skilled EA professionals recognize the harm it creates, harassment that is not illegal can, and is, typically ignored.

Women are equally likely to be bullies at work as men (50% each). Women harassers then target women in over 80% of cases; men target women 69% of the time. Thus most bullying is not addressed by current laws. It is two to three times more prevalent than illegal forms of harassment. It is also significantly more damaging to a recipient's mental health than sexual harassment.

Despite bullying's prevalence, severity and impact on people and organizations, internal HR investigations nearly always conclude that it is merely a clash in personalities between bully and target. Remarkably, the targets alone bear the costs of their unsolicited misery by experiencing stress-related complications. In 75% of cases, targets either leave their jobs to stop the bullying or are constructively discharged as part of the bullying.

Most bullies are supervisors and managers (70-90%) in the U.S., Britain and Australia. Some bullies are predisposed to

mistreat others, regardless of workplace cultures. Researchers in one UK study credited the importation of a globalized American command-and-control management style for the rise in bullying. For the majority of otherwise good people who become perpetrators, however, title power elicits the darker, crueller side we all possess but few manifest. And when pressure is on to meet investor profit goals or government efficiencies with fewer staff, managers are ordered to deliver results without regard for human consequences. The fiscal bottom line is paramount.

Toward Solutions

With respect to domestic violence, child abuse, school bullying, and other forms of interpersonal abuse, society began with denial, later changing slightly requiring victims to solve the problem not of their making, and eventually evolving to a state of intolerance of the violence. Either criminal or civil laws are passed to condemn the mistreatment which was once ignored.

The Institute introduced the first U.S. legislation to directly address the workplace bullying problem: California Assembly bill AB 1582, consideration in 2004. The proposed law will make actionable malicious, health-harming abusive work environments. Employers will have to have in place systems to correct and prevent misconduct that matches our definition of Workplace Bullying. America will finally join the company of industrialized nations that address adult workplace bullying.

Employee Perceptions

EA can play a major role in alleviating the distress of bullied individuals. EA professionals could leverage Workplace Bullying in organizations for the strategic influence the field seeks. Here's how.

Licensed mental health EA professionals are uniquely able to work with targeted individuals to restore their health. Others in the organization cannot do this. They are not counselors. It seems that *employee* health is at the core of *Employee Assistance*. Unless the profession's historical roots are an undesirable anachronism, the injured bullied person is your client.

Unfortunately, a few EA counselors have difficulty believing that work can traumatize individuals. We receive hundreds of anecdotal reports at the Workplace Bullying & Trauma Institute of EA counselors belittling self-referred individuals seeking relief from workplace trauma. It is disappointing when we hear of counselors who refuse to listen to targets' experiences, insisting that sessions be devoted to discovering what attributes the targets possess that could have led to their mistreatment. This practice of victim denigration harkens back to the unenlightened days when battered wives were seen as provoking and being responsible for the abuse they suffered.

The Califano report about violence in the U.S. Postal Service (*USPS Commission on a Safe and Secure Workplace*, August, 2000) included a survey of perceptions about EAP services. Managers were more satisfied than non-supervisory workers (83% vs. 62%). Most relevant was that 19% of mail handlers and carriers did not trust the EAP, seeing it as a management tool to punish employees.

Client trust depends on consistently demonstrated impartiality as well as clinical confidentiality. Straddling the fence between employee and management support exacerbates the conflict between competing interests. Further, programs that allow sharing of any clinical information in supervisor-referred cases obviously become tools for management. The seeds of EA role confusion have been planted for some time. According to the USPS report and our anecdotal evidence employee clients sense the ambiguity.

It seems that the profession is at a crossroads. Some fear becoming obsolescent or irrelevant if EA remains in its counseling, health care role. EA professionals should be consulted by management, but the domain of expertise should remain psychological health that others cannot call their niche.

Opportunities for EA

We believe that organizations need EA as workforce health advocates more than ever. Threats to employee health are on the rise. The Department of Labor has just promulgated new rules that preclude overtime pay for overtime work for millions of workers. Over 3 million jobs have been cut in the last 3 years which strikes fear into employees. The fear convinces them to stay in the job even when bullying mistreatment becomes health-endangering. In tight job markets, people have to stay and suffer to earn a livelihood. There are fewer employee advocates than ever. Union membership is shrinking from federal consolidation and private sector (think Wal-Mart) anti-organizing tactics. Employee privacy protections are nearly non-existent. Employees are subject to lots of screening by employers that ranges from violent predispositions to credit worthiness to DNA hair analyses. Screening connotes a basic distrust that poisons the workplace.

Workplace ethics are overwhelmed by extraordinary pressure in companies striving to meet unrealistic investor profit demands. The shenanigans of Enron, WorldCom and others show that executives will lie to please Wall Street analysts. The competitive marketplace has been internalized in the American workplace to render acceptable cutthroat, zero-sum competition among individuals. Complainants are retaliated against, even in cases where the mistreatment breaks laws.

There are human consequences that accompany the simultaneous escalation of workplace aggression and diminution of worker rights and protections. The EA profession has to choose whether to be a part of the solution or co-designer of the problem. Traditional consultants -- independent ones and internal organizational development staffers -- serve the needs of the executive team. Unfortunately, they are so immersed in their roles, they do not or can not communicate news about the deleterious impact some executive decisions have on non-executive employees. Because they are *not* mental health professionals, they do not even perceive the often unintentional harm decisions create. EA professionals can predict and ameliorate consequential harm.

EA professionals should be consultants to organization executives. However, your function would be to lobby for inclusion in the decision-making process solely to provide specialized input. EA executive consultants would comment on the anticipated psychological health impact of planned initiatives on individuals and work teams. You would then create response contingencies for change initiatives -- mergers, RIFs, new technology implementations -- as you now do violence episodes, and traumatizing disasters. Finally, you would implement the helping plans by deploying counselors.

One lesson gleaned from my experiences as both internal and external consulting is that you must have the ear of the top executives and circumvent management and HR. We suggest that EA elevate its visibility and influence by removing itself from HR to report directly to either the CEO or Board of Trustees. The dissociation from management would increase credibility with all employees who then turn to you for assistance when bullied.

In your role as workplace health consultants to executives, you can lobby to stop all Workplace Bullying. The rationale is twofold. First, it impacts the fiscal bottom line by creating turnover, recruitment and retention problems, avoidable litigation, and affects a host of intangible employer costs. The relevant data are gathered by HR and Risk Management but rarely surface at the executive level. EAs would be the conduit. Second, you can assert that an abused, injured, fearful workforce is not productive and likely to undermine all legitimate business interests. An additional charge of an evolving EA would be to attempt rehabilitation of identified bullies through fitness-for-duty psychological testing, emotional intelligence coaching, coupled with establishing the person's commitment to the organization over self-interest.

EA professionals could be uniquely positioned to educate your organizations from the inside while maintaining the original commitment to employees seeking help. Workplace Bullying and its impact on organizations is the cause that could lead you to advise executives. Work shouldn't hurt; only EA's, not management consultants, can make that point from inside the modern American workplace.

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The Drs. Namie together founded The Workplace Bullying Institute, an education, research and advocacy organization and wrote *The Bully At Work* (Sourcebooks, 2009). Gary is a former OD director in two healthcare systems, professor of management and a social psychologist. Ruth has a doctorate in clinical psychology and was Training Director for a Hawaiian hotel corporation.

The above reference to the USPS survey findings refers to:

The United States Postal Service Commission on a Safe and Secure Workplace, August 2000 prepared by The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (principal author: Joseph Califano)

The report's major recommendation number 7 (pg. 5) was that the USPS should "Mount a major effort to assure employees of the confidentiality of the employee assistance program (EAP) and that the program will not be used as a punishment, and encourage joint local management/union oversight of the EAP."

The relevant findings upon which recommendation 7 was made are found on pg. 49 of the Report. The data include the result that "16% of postal employees agree that the employee assistance program is used by managers and supervisors to punish employees. Mail handlers and city carriers are the most likely to agree (19 percent) ... "