The Challenge of Workplace Bullying

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Aggression at work is nothing new. Tempers flare for no apparent reason. One of the toughest parts of your job must be to orchestrate an end to outrageous workplace misbehavior in the most serious situations. Challenges in this area include identifying behavior that escalates to bullying and finding ways to end the incident at hand and prevent future incidents from occurring.

A 25-year history of international consensus among researchers and lawmakers defines workplace bullying as repeated mistreatment by one or more perpetrators of an individual or group. Some synonyms for workplace bullying (a phrase coined in Britain in the late 1980s) are psychological harassment (used in the 2004 Quebec provincial law), psychological violence (placing bullying as a sublethal, nonphysical form of workplace violence), workplace aggression and emotional abuse (academic researchers), lateral violence (nurses), status-blind harassment (legal professionals), and mobbing (the European term).

Bullying is a combination of verbal abuse and behaviors that are humiliating, threatening, or intimidating. The consequences are serious, including harm (health, social, or economic) to individuals and interference with productive work (an undermining of an employer's business interests). All aspects of bullying—choice of targets, timing of onset and cessation, tactics, intensity, and explanations for it—are unilaterally controlled by the perpetrator. Targets, the term we prefer to victims, do not invite or benefit from the unwarranted assaults. And bullying affects not only the target, but also coworkers who witness the bullying.

The two best estimates of bullying's prevalence in the United States come from a scientific sample of Michigan residents, which found that 1 in 6 workers were targets of bullying,[1] and a small sample study by Arizona State University, which found that bullying affected 23 percent[2] of the sample population.

Bullying encompasses a wide range of interpersonal misconduct and is evident in discrimination cases. State and federal laws identify classes of employees who cannot be harassed without the risk of complaint or lawsuit. That is, certain recipients enjoy protected-group status based on gender, race, age, disability, ethnicity, religion, or some state-specific criterion. Illegal civil rights mistreatment is status-based.

However, nearly three-quarters of all bullying occurs when the target is not a protected-group member or when the harasser is a protected-group member. Woman-on-woman harassment accounts for 50 percent of all bullying.[3] Unless the woman targeted for bullying can claim race or age biases, her cruel torment at the hands of another woman likely has no legal remedy.

Human resources professionals know that the law rarely provides redress for general harassment. Few workers, however, understand the narrow scope of workplace anti-harassment prohibitions. It is unfortunate that many employment professionals inadvertently convey to complainants that incidents not meeting civil rights violation criteria do not deserve an organizational response. Current U.S. employment laws neither offer a cure nor compel employers to prevent or correct bullying. However, focusing solely on legal compliance while ignoring reports about legal, but abusive, bosses and work teams places the organization at risk.

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HR CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

The most vexing situations for HR professionals involve bullying. There are common bullying scenarios in which HR must intervene, and these often have similar characteristics. For example, most often the person being bullied will approach HR after having suffered repeated incidents of bullying. She or he (80 percent of targets are women[4]) is typically emotional. On the surface, the case sounds like a clash of personality styles, often between boss and subordinate (71 percent of bullies are bosses[5]). Witness objectivity is lost because the time lag enables coworkers to take sides (loyalties to bully and target are evenly split[6]). The manager for the work team or the manager's manager typically avoids taking action, preferring to instruct the two principal combatants to "work it out" between themselves. (The bully's boss does nothing in 40 percent of cases or actually intensifies the negativity directed against the target in 42 percent of cases.[7])

In some cases, the bullying supervisor approaches HR first. He or she wants help from HR to deal with a "difficult" employee. There are warning signs of a disingenuous motive. The supervisor's short tenure in management, a pattern of prior complaints lodged about the supervisor by other workers or the identified "difficult" worker, or an exemplary or satisfactory work performance history by the employee accused of being "difficult" could all be clues. In fact, the bully aims to make HR an accomplice in the constructive discharge of the targeted employee. Timing determines perceptions. If the supervisor's call for help follows the target's complaint, retaliation is easy to detect. If the supervisor contacts HR first, the preemption serves to prejudice HR to discount the target's legitimate complaint about abusive supervision that follows.

The target typically waits a long period before seeking relief from bullying. Targeted people are exposed an average of 22 months,[8] and so bullying remains underreported. Even in Britain, where workplace bullying has been recognized since the 1980s, only 11 percent of British workers felt safe enough from retaliation or disbelief to report bullying that was experienced by 80 percent of the 2006 workplace survey respondents.[9] Personal shame can also hamper targets' willingness to report to employers. Targets' strong work ethic and corporate loyalty postpone complaints. Finally, targets spend a great deal of time obsessing over the bully's motivation ("why is he so cruel?").

REASONS FOR BULLYING BEHAVIOR

Bullies target people they perceive to be personally threatening. The top four explanations targets give for being targeted are refusing to

be subservient, possessing more technical skill than the bully, being better liked than the bully, and exposing fraud or crimes.[10] From an HR perspective, targets are ideal employees. They are self-starters, know the work, have emotional intelligence, are well liked, and are honest and principled. This trait cluster is what gets them bullied. Targets are nice people. They are nonconfrontational to the point that they cannot defend themselves when attacked. If a person is capable of counterattacking with aggression, that person usually will not be bullied.

Bullies are cruelly inventive and they are equally likely to be female (58 percent of bullies are women[11]). They adopt a wide range of tactics, often shifting gears within an hour depending on the target chosen or the audience. They are driven by a need to control other people. Regardless of tactic, bullies act arbitrarily in their own personal interest and often at the expense of accomplishing employer goals.

Through our work with companies in helping to resolve and prevent bullying, we have identified four types of bullying behavior:

1. The Screaming Mimi, the stereotypical bully, publicly humiliates targets to instill fear and to paralyze witnesses. He or she screams, yells, swears, and throws things.
2. The Constant Critic is the hypercritical nitpicker. Behind closed doors, he or she brands targets "incompetent" and engages in a methodical campaign of career destruction, abusing performance appraisals. This type of bully is the most potentially traumatizing because of the seeds of self-doubt he or she is able to plant in the target's psyche.
3. The Two-Headed Snake, a duplicitous Jekyll-and-Hyde creature, finds ways to destroy targets by rumor and engineers

divide-and-conquer schemes within work teams.
4. The Gatekeeper bully controls by withholding resources necessary for targets to succeed. He or she steals credit, fawns over favorites, and isolates and torments the unfavored.

It is important to understand what motivates bullies to act the way they do so that HR and other professionals can respond appropriately to bullying incidents and minimize future problems. We have found three reasons that explain bullying behavior:

1. The workplace environment fosters bullying behavior by allowing aggressive competition that pits individuals against each other. Team-building practices are absent, and workers succeed through cutthroat behavior.

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2. A toxic mix of personalities exists in the workplace, including highly aggressive, narcissistic individuals. A bully is not necessarily a psychopath and may act normally in other nonwork situations. He or she may be extremely ambitious, however, and willing to exploit others when opportunities arise. All bullies are Machiavellian and use others to advance their careers. Bullies see and seize opportunities to harm. People with a prosocial orientation, a desire to help, educate, or heal others, or those who are technically focused are especially vulnerable to bullying, as are workers who try to ignore office politics.

3. Employers offer a positive response to aggression. If bullies are rewarded through promotions and positive recognition, their behavior is encouraged and will continue. Bullying is cultivated as a desirable or necessary activity. Conversely, if bullies are publicly stopped, the employer sends a message of zero tolerance for bullying.

To effectively stop bullying, the organization must examine its response to bullying incidents and ensure that it is sending the right message to employees through workplace culture and the rewards system. Organizations must reverse any policy that gives any indication of tolerance for bullying. The majority of bullies are able to constrain their negative behavior when consequences for their actions change. It is also important to understand that employer efforts should not

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focus on attempting to change perpetrators' personalities. The most chronic, destructive bullies do not reform. They leave.

IMPACT OF BULLYING

An international antibullying movement exists because of the deleterious effects on a bullied target's health. Epidemiologists and occupational health researchers have linked exposure to an abusive work environment with several negative health consequences, all stress-related. Thirty years of research of the "job strain" concept—the simultaneous increase in task load and decrease of personal control over the tasks—reveals damage to cardiovascular

health.[12] Bullying is a severe form of job strain. The risk of cardiovascular disease (e.g., hypertension, stroke, heart attack) is 30 percent more likely when workers believe their workplace is unjust.[13] Bullying is injustice.

European epidemiologists, who dominate in researching the various impacts of bullying in the workplace, routinely posit that the work environment is a principal source of medical problems. Most European employment laws recognize the effect the work environment can have on workers and incorporate an employer's "duty of care," requiring that employees be kept physically and psychologically safe. It is an indisputable responsibility for employers.

In the United States, we tend to hold individuals, and not employers, responsible for experiences at work. We underestimate the influence of less tangible environmental factors, such as psychological safety, work assignments, quality of supervision, hours worked, and ergonomics. U.S. employers do not have obligations like those of their European counterparts. With respect to psychological workplace violence, they act with impunity as long as the antidiscrimination laws do not pertain.

Unremitting exposure to stress from a toxic workplace can harm an individual's psychological well-being. Problems include inordinate anxiety, clinical depression (in 39 percent of targets[14]) and post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD (in 30 percent of women targets, 21 percent of men targets[15]). Psychiatrist Heinz Leymann ran the world's first work trauma clinic in Sweden in the early 1990s. His seminal research linked bullying (which he called mobbing) to PTSD.[16] That is, workers were shown to have suffered a psychological injury. Subsequent work by the Norwegian clinical psychologist S. E. Einarsen demonstrates that work-induced trauma is as disruptive of life

functioning as trauma induced by war.[17] For many bullied targets, the workplace has become a war zone.

Both Leymann and Einarsen warned of a secondary traumatization that accompanies postincident attempts to seek relief. It is difficult to convince employers to believe the intensity of the negative actions perpetrated against them by workplace bullies. Employers reflexively challenge allegations that workers could be subjected to abusive workplaces. This is done despite HR often having confirming evidence based on pattern and practice data about repeat harassers. Most employees, and especially HR, know who the bullies are and what they do.

Targets are routinely directed by HR to seek workers' compensation for their emotional injuries, but examiners who are chosen by employers for cases of stress-related psychological or emotional harm rarely award workers' compensation in bullying cases. Leymann and Einarsen argued that employer resistance and insurer obstacles prolong or prevent recovery from work trauma in bullying cases. A growing number of states now exclude work stress as a compensable injury. By comparison, the workers' compensation board of the state of South Australia hosted a workplace bullying conference in 2002. There, work stress claims are uncontested. In contrast, bullied individuals also endure stages of estrangement from coworkers after being targeted by a bully. Resentment for dragging witnesses into negative emotional states (one British study found that 11 percent of coworkers vicariously experienced PTSD[18]) is followed by isolation because coworkers fear that association will cause them to be targeted. Abandonment is an end state of the decline in social standing if the bullying is prolonged and the target is

chronically absent from work, forcing coworkers to cover the workload.

In addition to causing health and social harm to targets, bullying also has economic consequences. Bullying stops when targets are terminated (in 37 percent of cases[19]), quit to restore their health (33 percent), transfer out of the job they once loved (17 percent), or when the perpetrator is punished (4 percent) or terminated (9 percent). Clearly, bullying is a workplace dilemma for which the target is sacrificed in order to make it stop. As an empathic professional, you can understand why targets and witnesses to bullying feel that their trust and rights to procedural justice have been violated.

Bullying affects the workplace in other ways that employers should be concerned

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about. First, bullying is three times more prevalent than sexual harassment[20] and creates more depression and hostility.[21] Yet, employers have been slow to invest as much in preventing and correcting bullying as they have in correcting other forms of harassment and discrimination.

Further, bullying affects the bottom line both from loss of productivity from targets and witnesses of bullying and also from resulting lawsuits and expensive settlements. Bullied targets, often the most talented employees, are driven from the workplace. Absenteeism disrupts productivity and fosters resentment, and turnover is expensive.

Finally, employee recruitment and retention are made more difficult if the employer's reputation features the antics of one or more petty tyrants. Senior management may

admire the "toughness" of the bullying managers, but word of mouth within the labor pool tarnishes an employer's reputation.

BECOMING A RESPONSIVE ORGANIZATION

For the most part, U.S. employers do not handle bullying incidents appropriately. Often, responses to bullying are defensive, counterintuitive, and unsafe. Below are suggestions of how employers should respond.

1. Treat the bullied target-complainant as credible until proven otherwise. Targets are a source of valuable data about the organization. Don't shoot the messengers. Believe targets as readily as you accept supervisors' complaints about "difficult" employees. The only people who do not believe bullying happens have either never had it happen to them or are bullies themselves.

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2. Restore safety for the bullied target. Recognize bullying as an abusive relationship where violence flows in one direction and is similar to domestic violence, but the abuser is on the payroll. Abusers in families lie; bullies lie. Outsiders grow frustrated with battered spouses who don't leave (naïvely concluding that "if conditions were so bad, she would have left"). Executives, management, HR, and coworkers can't believe targets stay or allow the abuse to continue, so they mistakenly conclude that nothing bad has happened.
3. Do not denigrate the target. Blaming people for involuntarily experiencing

health-harming mistreatment makes no sense. It is an error in attribution, the process by which we explain events in our world. We tend to overestimate the explanatory power of personality because that is what is most visible. From a less-biased, more neutral perspective, we can identify environmental factors that compel people to act at work as they do. For example, it is wrong to explain bullying simply as the result of the bully's (some say psychopathic) personality. Perhaps he or she is acting on orders from superiors. Perhaps the bully's personal life is crumbling, and emotional volatility is inescapable for a short period. Step back and see the context.

4. Patient and skilled investigators should incorporate the above three suggestions in investigating bullying-related complaints. Fact-finding is often difficult because of the powerful negative emotions that have come to characterize the work team you interview. Coworkers too eager to participate are probably the bully's allies. Most coworkers fear retaliation from the bully and are reluctant to testify.

Bullied targets are difficult interviewees because the potential trauma can interrupt normal cognitive functioning and perhaps alter their personality. Remarkable neurobiological studies (using MRI technology) show that emotional regulation centers in the brain are physically transformed from exposure to unrelenting stress. If PTSD is present, the target may show anger. Targets are also obsessed with details of their mistreatment and have trouble summarizing facts.

5. Differentiate bullying from conflict between two parties with equal power. You would not attempt to mediate domestic violence. Bullies are not rational

players willing to acknowledge the humanity of the other party. The underlying constructs of power and control define the bully's perspective. Bullies never admit personal responsibility. Someone or something always compels them to act as they do. Mediation is the wrong tool for bullying.

Ending the Violence

There are two approaches to ending bullying. One is a short-term fix, working with the bullies who have been identified through interviews, surveys, or historical patterns. This requires employment professionals to use more than traditional communications training or anger-management techniques, which staff accurately perceive as ineffective. We work intensively with bullies to refocus them on organizational and people-handling priorities. This is the first time they have been told to subordinate their personal needs. Sympathy for life stressors and personal history is expressed. But the intervention we call the Respectful Conduct Clinic ends with a signed contract in which the CEO obligates the individual to comply with the new antibullying policy (if one is created) or to stop previously explicit destructive behavior. Follow-up monitoring ensures compliance. Failure to comply carries negative consequences. However, bullying is the product of the workplace culture, and if the employer has allowed bullying behavior to become prevalent, working with one bully in isolation may not be enough to prevent future incidents.

Therefore, we suggest instead a comprehensive, systemic approach into which the Respectful Conduct Clinic can be rolled. The safety net for bullies must be eliminated if bullying is to stop in the long run. Our

solution is called the Blueprint for a Bullying-Free Workplace and includes the following:

1. Create an explicit antibullying policy. Policies obligate employers, whereas mission statements do not. Extend, combine, or replace existing antiviolence and anti-harassment policies, or write a stand-alone antibullying code of conduct. Define bullying precisely and declare its unacceptability. Designate a representative group to collaboratively write the policy and enforcement procedures.
2. Design credible enforcement procedures. Policies that remain unenforced promote employee cynicism. Trained, trustworthy, peer fact finders are effective. This is the employer's chance to show a genuine desire to change the culture of aggression.
3. Provide restorative interventions for bullied individuals and affected work teams. Some will require help from mental health professionals, depending on the length of exposure to bullying. Counselors connected with an employee assistance plan (EAP) can help if they understand bullying. Don't forget that coworker witnesses are affected too.
4. Education and training are critical. Use traditional policy rollout procedures as is currently done with antiharassment policy announcements and employee training. Effective in 2007, the state of California has mandated sexual harassment training for supervisors and managers. The process is well honed. In similar fashion, after the creation of an antibullying policy, employers need to provide training about the phenomenon of bullying and the employer's new policy of intolerance to it. Ideally, there would also be supplementary training for specialty groups: HR,

employee assistance program, executive team, and board/trustees.

TAKE A PROACTIVE STANCE

Getting U.S. employers to stop bullying is an uphill struggle. Since 2003, ten U.S. states have introduced, but not yet passed, some version of antibullying legislation for the workplace, and the only North American law against bullying is Quebec's. In contrast, nearly every European nation has laws or occupational health and safety regulations to prohibit bullying.

Although some employers will not address bullying until there are state or other laws that specifically prohibit such behavior and make employers legally accountable, proactive employers understand that bullying is not a self-correcting problem and will take a different tack. Employers who are concerned about

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maintaining a safe work environment for their employees, improving productivity, and preserving their bottom lines know that they must rid the workplace of bullying and bullies. They recognize that failing to create and enforce policies and procedures to address bullying in the workplace will lead to a corrosive work environment riddled with high absenteeism and turnover that is likely to result in expensive legal fees, settlements, and severances.

NOTES

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