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By Gary Namie

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# Workplace bullying: Escalated incivility

*The time has come to treat workplace bullying the same as sexual harassment or racial discrimination, to identify the perpetrators, establish rules of conduct and penalties, and even pass laws prohibiting and penalizing bullying. This author, an expert on the subject, draws a compelling picture of workplace bullying and suggests a blueprint that can help employers reduce or even eliminate it.*

By Gary Namie

Gary Namie is co-founder of The Workplace Bullying & Trauma Institute, an education, research and advocacy organization ([bullyinginstitute.org](http://bullyinginstitute.org)) and co-author of *The Bully At Work* (Sourcebooks, 2003). He is a social psychologist and consultant, and former professor of management at the University of Southern California.

*"Violence in the workplace begins long before fists fly or lethal weapons extinguish lives. Where resentment and aggression routinely displace cooperation and communication, violence has occurred."*

Bernice Fields, Arbitrator

## The bullying phenomenon

Bullying in the workplace is far too widespread today, but before we can come to understand it, we must understand that bullying is different from harmless incivility, rudeness, boorishness, teasing and other well-known forms of interpersonal torment. Bullying is a form of violence, but only rarely involves fighting, battery or homicide. It is mostly sub-lethal, non-physical violence. And as our research data show, bullying crosses boundaries of gender, race and organizational rank.

Consider that workplace incivility, bullying and physical violence lie on a 10-point continuum of organizational disruption. Incivilities range from 1 to 3, while bullying covers mild to severe interference with the accomplishment of legitimate business interests, reflecting scores of 4 to 9. The highest score is reserved for battery and homicide which grind work completely to a halt. A parallel dimension views the consequences from the perspective of the mistreated individual. Incivilities cause little to no harm, bullying can cause mild to severe harm, and physical violence can result in death.

## A short history of workplace bullying

The founder of the international anti-bullying movement, Heinz Leymann, cared most about bullying's impact on the health of individuals. Leymann was a German psychiatrist who established the world's first Work Trauma clinic in Sweden in the 1980's. He documented the traumatization that can result from sustained "psychological terrorization" in the workplace. He used the term "mobbing." The term "workplace bullying" was coined by the pioneering British journalist Andrea Adams in 1992, who applied bullying to adulthood misery.

Dr. Ruth Namie and I introduced the term "workplace bullying" to the U.S. in the popular press in 1998. Our associate, David Yamada, professor of law at Suffolk University in Boston, wrote the seminal article for the legal community in March, 2000 (*Georgetown Law Journal*, 2000, vol.88, issue 3, "The Phenomenon of Workplace Bullying and the Need for Status-Blind Hostile Work Environment Protection," Pp. 475-536.)

We define workplace bullying as "status-blind" interpersonal hostility that is deliberate, repeated and sufficiently severe as to harm the targeted person's health or economic status. Further, it is driven by perpetrators'

need to control another individual, often undermining legitimate business interests in the process.

The best estimate of bullying's prevalence in the U.S. comes from a year 2000 survey that randomly sampled Michigan residents. The researchers found that 16.7 percent of respondents reported a severe disruption of their lives from workplace aggression. Thus, we can extrapolate and say that about one in six workers is bullied. (Loraleigh Keashly and Karen Jagatic, Wayne State University, 2000.)

### Characteristics of bullying

How can a problem so prevalent not trigger societal outrage? Silence by targeted persons is understandable because shame stems from being controlled and humiliated. Co-workers' silence makes sense in a fear-

**Regardless of how bullying is manifested -- either verbal assaults or strategic moves to render the target unproductive and unsuccessful -- it is the aggressor's desire to control the target that motivates the action**

plagued environment when people are unsure if they might next be targeted.

More puzzling is the typical employer response in light of internal anti-harassment and anti-violence policies. In a survey conducted by the Workplace Bullying & Trauma Institute, respondents described the nature of support, or lack of it, provided by others at work. Targets who had reported the abusive misconduct to the perpetrator's (bully's) manager and had asked for relief, elicited positive, helpful responses in only 18 percent of cases. In 42 percent of instances the bully's boss actually compounded the problem. And in 40 percent of cases, the boss did nothing, which is not a neutral response after help was explicitly requested. Human Resources and anti-discrimination officers were similarly unhelpful: 17 percent took positive steps to stop the bullying, 32 percent reacted negatively, and 51

percent did nothing.

Bullying encompasses mistreatment that includes same-sex and same-race harassment. Our research discovered that in only 25 percent of bullying cases does the target have protected group status and thus qualify the offenses as sexual harassment or racial discrimination. A university survey conducted by University of Illinois researchers found a similar dominance of bullying over forms of illegal harassment. The fact that bullying is not illegal makes it easy to ignore even though it is three times more prevalent than its better-recognized, illegal forms.

Women and men are bullies. Women comprise 58 percent of the perpetrator pool, while men represent 42 percent. Our research also shows that when the targeted person is a woman, she is bullied by a woman in 63 percent of cases; when the target is male, he is bullied by a man in 62 percent of incidents. Most bullying is same-sex harassment which is ignored by laws and employer policies. Overall, women comprise the majority of bullied people (80 percent).

In fact, WBTI research shows that half of all bullying is woman-on-woman. Unless the target enjoys protected status based on race, ethnicity, religion or disability, it is not likely that the current laws will provide the target with legal redress. Without laws, employers are reluctant to recognize, let alone correct or prevent, destructive behavior, preferring to minimize it as "personality clashes."

Bullying is nearly invisible. It is non-physical, and nearly always sub-lethal workplace violence. Workplace homicide grabs headlines as vivid rare events even in the violent United States. Corporate decision makers invest heavily in prevention and response processes, complete with zero tolerance policies.

In contrast, bullying is psychological violence, mostly covert and sometimes overt. It is psychological violence, both in its nature and impact. Regardless of how bullying is manifested -- either verbal assaults or strategic moves to render the target unproductive and unsuccessful -- it is the aggressor's desire to control the target that motivates the action. The major risk is psychological damage, but counseling is not offered by employers to complainants who report bullying.

A recent study by the United States Postal Service provided comparative frequencies: physical assaults, 1 in 25; illegal harassment 1 in 8; and verbal abuse 1 in 4. Employers are not interested in the most common negative trend in contemporary workplaces, abusive interpersonal relationships. But changes in related arenas give hope that the silence about bullying is crumbling.

Employers have begun to consider the impact of negative emotional behaviour on work productivity. Depression impacts work and employers are taking notice. Also, thanks to the Corporate Alliance to End

### **The characteristic common to all bullies is that they are controlling competitors who exploit their cooperative targets. Most bullies would stop if the rules changed and bullying was punished**

Partner Violence (CAEPV.org), employers are learning how domestic violence impacts the workplace. First, it is easy for abusive spouses to kill their victims at work. Abused workers miss a great deal of work and are distracted and unproductive. Enlightened CAEPV member firms believe that employers should be sensitive to traumatized victims as injured people deserving human compassion.

Bullying closely resembles the phenomenon of domestic violence. Both were shrouded in silence before being brought to public attention. Partner violence victims initially were blamed for their fate. Eventually the behavior was deemed unacceptable by society as codified in law. Workplace bullying deserves the same evolution from recognition to prohibition. The glaring difference between domestic and workplace psychological violence is that the latter finds the abuser on the employer's payroll.

#### **Damaging people**

Bullying impacts targeted employees by causing a host of stress-related health problems. The WBTI 2003

survey polled self-described targets. Stress effects range from severe anxiety (76 percent prevalence), disrupted sleep (71 percent), loss of concentration (71 percent), PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder, 47%), clinical depression (39%), and panic attacks (32%). Left untreated, and with prolonged exposure, cardiovascular stress-related diseases can result from pathophysiologic changes to the body that transform social factors into damaging biological consequences.

PTSD is a psychological injury. Few blame victims for having it when causes are natural. Yet the experience is just as strong when trauma is induced by intentional human design. Leymann documented Work Trauma as problematic in Sweden, the result of psychosocial workplace stressors. He also estimated that 10 percent of his country's suicides were related to workplace traumatization.

Targets of workplace bullying endure their pain, on average, for 22 months. The attribute common to all targets is that they are unwilling or unable to react to unwarranted aggression with aggression. Research and anecdotal evidence show that it is the emotionally unintelligent perpetrators who escalate their tyrannical misconduct when they feel threatened by, and react in response to, targets' asserted independence, technical and social skills or ethical whistle blowing. Targets do not seek to be tormented any more than sexual harassment targets invite undesirable assaults or domestic violence victims seek to be beaten or verbally abused.

In an individualistic culture, people tend to blame victims for the harm they endure and make them responsible for solving their unprovoked problems. Cavalier justifications for accepting psychological injury at work include "that's why they call it work," "capitalism depends on competition," and "get used to him, he's just that way, grow a thicker skin."

For a bullied target, health impairment is coupled with economic setbacks that begin when the bully appears in her life. Bullied targets have a 70 percent chance that they will lose their jobs, either voluntarily or through constructive discharge, after being targeted. If the bullying has stopped, it is because 17 percent of targets transferred. In only 13 percent of cases are perpetrators punished or terminated. Destructive aggression carries

few risks for perpetrators.

## The bullies

Though bullies torment peers and sometimes those above them in the organization chart, WBTI research shows that 71 percent of bullies outrank their targets. Most bullies are bosses. If strict competition is the operating principle at work, then it is a zero-sum game --personal gains made at the expense of others.

It would be convenient to categorize all bullies as psychopaths. Then, all solutions would be focused on rehabilitating individuals. However, only a small proportion of bullies (approximately 4 percent according to the American Psychiatric Association) may have genuinely disordered personalities--antisocial or narcissistic. The characteristic common to all bullies is that they are controlling competitors who exploit their cooperative targets. Most bullies would stop if the rules changed and bullying was punished.

We sort bullies into four categories, based on the wide range of tactics employed, and which are too numerous to list here.

- The *Screaming Mimi*, the stereotypical bully, controls the emotional tone for everyone else. He toxifies the workplace with mood swings and unpredictable displays of anger. Targets are publicly humiliated to convince witnesses that the bully is to be feared. He usually stops short of physical violence, but this volatile individual poses the violent risk employers fear most.
- The *Constant Critic* is the hyper-critical nitpicker. Her attention to minutiae and obsession over others' performance is the way she hides her own deficiencies and insecurities. This bully resorts to name calling. She loves to complain about everyone else's "incompetence." She invents targets' "errors" to belittle and to confuse them. Though she prefers behind-closed-door settings, she can berate targets in public, too.
- The *Two-Headed Snake* slithers up the organization chart, reserving brutality for those

below. Snakes defame the reputation of targets to boost their own self-image. The Snake spreads rumors and engineers "divide and conquer" schemes within work teams to turn co-workers against the target. His version of events is always believed while the target's perspective is discounted.

- The *Gatekeeper* is obsessed with control. She allocates time, money, staffing and information in ways that ensure her target's failure. Then, she has an excuse to complain about "performance problems." One ludicrous bully actually set office clocks so that everyone seemed to come to work late and leave early.

Solutions should be focused less on personality than on altering the rewards and punishments that would-be aggressors experience as part of a workplace culture.

## Characteristics of the bullying-prone workplace

- "Making the numbers," an obsession with outcomes is uncritically adopted
- Recruitment, promotion, and reward systems focus on individuals' "strength of personality" or interpersonal aggressiveness while ignoring emotional intelligence
- Short-term planning, e.g., to meet quarterly investor projections, governs operations.
- Internal conduct codes limit prohibitions to narrowly defined illegal incidents.
- Executives give higher priority to personal friendships than to legitimate business interests.
- Fear is a dominant, desired workplace emotion, whether deliberately engineered or inadvertently created.
- Misuse of performance appraisal processes occur with impunity.

## Why employer\$ \$hould care

In Canada, there exists an implied contract invoking an employer's duty of care for employee safety. Employers are liable for the sexually harassing misconduct of their supervisors. Liability stems from employers' control over the creation and maintenance of the work environment: roles, responsibilities,

behavioral expectations, and the workplace culture's health or toxicity.

Here are several reasons why employers should address workplace bullying:

- 1 It is 3 times more prevalent than sexual harassment. Illegal discrimination and harassment require significant investments of time and money to identify, correct and prevent. Employers already know what to do about harassment.
- 2 It is costly: Employment practices liability can be substantial. Bullied targets, often the most talented employees, are driven from the workplace. Turnover is expensive. Increased health care utilization can result in hefty premium costs borne by employers.
- 3 Data to prevent bullying-related losses exist. Because the complaint system gatekeepers (in HR) hear all the stories, the employer has evidence of bullying's prevalence. Everyone knows who the repeat offenders are.
- 4 Witnesses know when bullying happens, whether or not it was behind closed doors. When a high-performing employee is fired and humiliated by "exit parade"--given a box to take private belongings, escorted by HR and security--or simply disappears without explanation one day, fear dominates the workplace. Fear-driven workplaces with poor morale undermine employee commitment and productivity.
- 5 Employee recruitment and retention are made more difficult when the employer's reputation suffers from the antics of one or more petty tyrants.

### A blueprint for employers

Employers and their representatives should care about bullying for the reasons outlined above. Employer-led, voluntary solutions are the most likely to succeed. Here we suggest four steps for employers to pursue. The system follows a path familiar to any company that has coupled recognition training with a prohibitive policy and enforcement mechanism.

## 1. Create A new values-driven policy

Ideal provisions in the policy include:

- Declaration of Unacceptability  
The organization must state its displeasure with the misconduct
- Hostile Workplace Protections for Everyone  
To extend rights to everyone regardless of protected group status  
May extend, combine or replace existing anti-violence & anti-harassment policies
- Inescapable Definition  
To reserve prohibitions only for severe incidents, to clarify the threshold for taking action
- Non-Punitive Separation for Safety  
To appropriately place bullying in the health and safety domain
- Documentation of Adverse Impact  
To discourage frivolous complaints or abuse of the policy  
To incorporate perpetrator pattern & practice over time

## 2. New, credible enforcement processes

- Credible Third-Party Investigation & Adjudication Process  
To foster employee trust, to remove influence of personal relationships
- Progressive Disciplinary Action  
Not zero tolerance, to allow for change in conduct
- Retaliation Prohibition  
To count offenses of retaliation separately, to stop the cycle of violence

## 3. Restorative interventions for at-risk teams and individuals

- Coaching for identified perpetrators with employment-contingent change contract
- Interviewing affected workteams to identify those most harmed, to provide counseling

#### 4. General and specialized education

- Executive orientation & commitment
- Managerial training
- Specialty preparation for HR, Anti-discrimination Officers, Risk Managers
- All-Hands training coupled with policy implementation

Despite obvious economic advantages of following this blueprint, employers rarely pursue this tack. They face no sanctions for ignoring generalized workplace harassment or bullying. It is easier to stay in denial or to ignore complaints when they surface.

#### A Legislative Solution

A 1998, a *Washington Post* newspaper editorial called on federal lawmakers to write specific anti-harassment laws without restriction to discrimination against protected groups. The editorial, written in response to Supreme Court decisions extending employer liability for discrimination, stated, that "what bothers people about abusive workplace conduct, after all, is not the fact that it may be discriminatory but that it is abusive in the first place." (Washington Post, March 8, 1998.)

In Quebec, in December, 2002, the province's Labour Standards Act was overhauled. For the first time in Canada, there will be a ban on "psychological harassment" in the workplace. That term is vaguely defined as any "vexatious behaviour in the form of repeated and hostile or unwanted conduct that affects an employee's psychological or physical integrity," including unwanted attitudes, comments and gestures.

Employers have until June, 2004 to prepare for the law's implementation. They need only show they have taken "reasonable action" to prevent or stop the harassment to avoid possible penalties that range from paying the victim's psychological treatment expenses to "punitive and moral damages." The four-step employer Blueprint outlined above would afford adequate protection for conscientious employers.

Starting in June 2004, employees experiencing

psychological harassment (bullying according to most of our definition), may begin to file complaints with the Quebec Labour Standards Commission.

The WBTI has sponsored the first U.S. proposed legislation in California, scheduled for consideration in 2004. Its language is more precise than the Quebec law, relying on demonstrated health impairment as the criterion for bringing legal action.

Of course, the real value of having a law in place for bullied employees is to legitimize targets' complaints, compelling employers to correct and prevent "status-blind," health-impairing abusive misconduct. When employers take such steps, the bullies can be held accountable. The Quebec provincial law is a first step. Canadian employees' quality of life at work depends now on conscientious employers. ■