

Workplace Bullying

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Introduction

Contrary to conventional wisdom, bullying is not confined to the elementary school playground. It often occurs in adulthood and is increasingly seen in the workplace. It is important to note, however, that there are significant differences between children bullies and adult bullies, and familiarity with one does not imply familiarity with the other (Randall, 1997). Bullying can take many forms in the workplace: sexual harassment, racial discrimination, physical aggression, and psychological aggression. The latter is the most common and is the focus of this paper (Randall, 1997), but it must be noted that there are no fixed boundaries between these forms.

There is no agreed upon definition of what constitutes workplace bullying, but common themes in the recent literature can be used to create a general working definition. Workplace bullying is aggressive behavior in the workplace with deliberate intent to cause psychological distress to others; it does not have to be repeated or repeated regularly to be bullying behavior. The question of intention is important and most victims subscribe to this view (Randall, 1997).

Recent research has shown bullying to be a widespread phenomenon with a high cost to both the employee victim and the organization itself (Glendinning, 2001). It is clearly not the “red herring” or “litigation bandwagon” that some may dismiss it as. For the victims, it can be a lonely and devastating experience that could ultimately ruin their careers and health (Wilson, 2004).

Bullying Behavior

It is important to understand the nature of bullying behavior, because, from the observer’s perspective, may simply be two people who can’t get along with each other (Randall, 1997). Bullying incidents are rarely isolated, and initial incidents may seem too subtle to be bullying (Peyton, 2003). Despite disagreement on the definition of bullying, there is general consensus on what behaviors constitute bullying in most circumstance.

Some subtle forms of bullying can at first seem to be absent-mindedness. Complaining about the victim’s absence at a meeting that he or she was deliberately not invited to is one example. Another example is not offering thanks or recognition regardless of how well the victim does their job preferring instead to seek out the smallest fault. Other subtle behavior might include rumor mongering and undermining the victim’s authority.

More manifest behaviors could include using personal information to humiliate or discredit a victim to his or her peers or changing deadlines, insisting that work be completed by an unrealistic date. Other gross behaviors might include instructing the victim’s peers not to

speak to him or her, sarcastic remarks, ostensible accidents, and discrediting of the victim's professional reputation.

Incidence of Bullying

Bullying is common, and it is naive for a manager to assume that it won't happen in his or her organization. It is estimated that one in four employees in the industrialized world is the victim of harassment, threats or physical attacks (Randall, 1997). A study of over 1000 participants conducted in the United Kingdom found that 53% had experienced workplace bullying during their careers, and 77% had witnessed it happening to another employee during their careers (Rayner, 1997). Another study suggested that approximately 90% of the workforce suffers from a workplace bully at some point during their career (Glendinning, 2001). Bullying occurs often enough for the International Labor Organization (ILO) to emphasize physical and emotional violence as being one of the most serious problems facing the workplace in the new millennium (CSC, 2004).

The Bullies

Studies in both the United States (WBTI, 2003) and the United Kingdom (Wilson, 2004) have found that approximately half of all workplace bullies are women, contradicting the common assumption that only men bully. Unfortunately, bullies are not easy to identify. There is no standard profile for the workplace bully, and most are not bullies to their families or in public places where such behavior would reflect badly (Randall, 1997). A bully may be the victim's supervisor, co-worker or customer, and it is only a pattern of behavior that identifies them.

It is easy to dismiss the bully as simply psychotic or opportunistic, and many bullying behavior do exhibit the traits of psychopathy or sociopathy (O'Connor, 2004). These disorders, however, represent extremes. Peyton identifies three types of bullies. The self-righteous bullies cannot accept that they could possibly be wrong, are devoid of self awareness, and neither know nor care about the impact of their behavior on others. The fearful bullies are afraid, vulnerable, see themselves as victims, and behave in ways they believe will protect them from some perceived danger. The third type of bullies behave in ways that they believe are expected, emulating the behaviors of previous managers. The last type is the least common but responds the best to coaching towards more appropriate behavior (Peyton, 2003).

There are many different views on the personality traits of bullies. One view is that bullies are weak, incompetent and immature (Wilson, 2004). Another is that bullies are very intelligent, clever and skilled at manipulating and misrepresenting facts (Peyton, 2003). There is agreement, however, that bullies are generally inadequate in forming human relations and that they gain some satisfaction from the suffering of their victims.

Organizational Culture

Personality traits alone are usually not sufficient to allow bullying to develop. It is often an organization's culture that creates an environment that allows, and may actually encourage, bullying (Randall, 2001). Three common abusive organizational cultures are the win/lose culture, the blame culture and the sacrifice culture. In a win/lose culture, everyone is out for himself or

herself and withholding information from colleagues is common. It is also a highly competitive environment with little teamwork. The blame culture causes individuals to be afraid to step out of line for fear of being blamed for doing something wrong. Finally, the sacrifice culture requires people to put their jobs before their personal lives to the extent that they may eventually become ill (Peyton, 2003).

Other organizational characteristics that may encourage bullying are fear for one's position, an authoritarian management style, lack of training, little participation, excessive workloads, impossible deadlines no procedures for resolving problems, and no clear codes of acceptable conduct (GPMU, 2004). Peyton points out that some characteristics of a healthy work environment include the organization actually living up to its mission statement, respecting the employees' work/life balance, empowering people to do their jobs, dealing with conflicts immediately and openly, and free expression of diversity (2003).

Randall reports that bullying is less common in larger organizations. The greater the competition for promoted posts, the less likely it is that aggressive employees will be promoted beyond middle management. In smaller organizations, however, the bully may be seen as the one who gets the job done well (1997). Another possible reason for the lower incidence in larger organizations may be the existence of enforced codes of conduct and standards for workplace diversity that are common in large organizations.

Effects of Bullying on the Victims

Though some victims may have personality traits that encourage bullying (Randall, 2001), it is often an arbitrary trait as trivial as hair color (Peyton, 2003). Regardless of why or how a bully chooses his or her victim, the effect on the victim always involves psychological stress. A victim's suffering can sometimes last for years, and many victims begin by assuming that they are the source of the problem.

Symptoms such as anxiety, sleep disorders, digestive disorders, irritation, depression and psychosomatic complaints are common among bullying victims. In the most extreme cases, a victim may either commit suicide or commit murder in the workplace. Some research has found that victims' symptoms often fit within the diagnostic criteria of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Randall, 2001). PTSD can result in sufferers re-experiencing traumatic events in dreams, flashbacks or even re-enacting the event. The symptoms can appear with no apparent trigger or through a seemingly innocuous trigger such as seeing a car of the same type as driven by the bully (Peyton, 2003).

The victim, however, is not the only one to suffer from bullying. Family members may feel they are part of the distress, and friends may feel shut out and unable to help. Colleagues may feel powerless, guilty for not helping and fearful of being the next victim if they do help.

Costs of Bullying to the Organization

The most immediately noticeable effect on the organization is its bottom line. Employees who are being bullied are less productive, and employees who witness the bullying may become less productive if they start to believe the organization doesn't care about them.

Employees who are worried about defending themselves cannot focus on their jobs. A 1990 study by the American Bureau of National Affairs found that between \$5 billion and \$6 billion was lost each year as a result of decreased productivity caused by actual or perceived employee abuse (Randall, 1997).

Organizations with workplace bullies may also experience high turnover rates and talent flight. One study concluded that bully bosses might play a significant part of the job-hopping phenomenon (Glendinning, 2001). Another study found that 82% of people targeted by a bully leave their workplace: 38% for health reasons, 44% because of performance reviews manipulated to show them as incompetent (Farrell, 2002). The cost of replacing these employees is often double their salaries.

A less tangible impact on the organization is its reputation. When a bullied employee leaves, he or she will likely take along their bitter memories. As an organization gains the reputation of being a hostile workplace, recruitment can become more difficult and result in a skill shortage (Glendinning, 2001). If this reputation reaches an organization's customers, the effect can be devastating.

Conclusion

Workplace bullying is both real and widespread. The stress it places on its victims violates basic human dignity, and its cost to an organization can be tremendous. Fortunately, tolerance for it is declining as academics release new statistics about its human and monetary costs (Farrell, 2002).

Few legal protections exist in the United States, but legislation in Europe, Canada, and Australia has been enacted to address workplace bullying (WBTI, 2003a). In the United States, section 5a of the Federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration's regulations requires that employers provide a safe and healthy workplace for all employees. This has sometimes been used to hold bullies liable for their actions where it is proven that they constituted a workplace hazard (Farrell, 2002).

It is impossible to prevent bullying completely, but it can be actively discouraged through conflict management, organizational policies and education. Part of what encourages bullies is the reward it sometimes receives. Management styles described as "tough," "no nonsense," and "hard as nails" are applauded in boardrooms and are often code words for a bully boss. The bully to be recognizes and masters these techniques to become a full-fledged bully (Glendinning, 2001).

It is an unfortunate reality that the victim is often the one who is fired and not the bully. An almost equal number leave the organization (WBTI, 2003). The best defense a bullying victim has is an organization that actually cares about the welfare of its staff.

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