

Workplace Bullying: What You Need To Know and Can Do To Address It

Contributed by Dan Stahl

Sue, who works as a customer service representative for an insurance company, is “asked” by her supervisor in the open Customer Service work area, “Why can’t you answer as many calls per hour as Nick?! You’ll never make it here if you don’t pick it up!” Fernando, who works as a CAD designer in an architectural design firm, is told by the Art Director, “I can’t believe you made that same error again! What am I supposed to do with someone like you!? Can’t you get it?!!” Lucy, who is an experienced Assembler in a durable-goods manufacturing plant, is “coached” by her new supervisor with “C’mon, Lucy Goosey, keep up with the big boys on your team or you’ll be pushing a broom in the warehouse!”

Direct, constructive coaching or workplace bullying? To the employees involved and to an outside observer, it is usually pretty clear when bullying occurs.

Bullying is a major problem in workplaces all over the world. A recent study estimated that approximately one in six U.S. workers had directly experienced bullying within the previous year.

What is bullying?

Although there is no legal definition of bullying, it is generally defined as “repeated, unreasonable actions of individuals (or a group) directed towards an employee (or a group of employees) which is intended to intimidate and creates a risk to the health and safety of the employee(s).

In this first of a two-part series of articles, I’ll describe some reasons why bullying occurs, provide examples of bullying, describe how it affects people and organizations and provide some preventive actions. In part two, I’ll describe appropriate responses to bullying and briefly describe the pending legislation under consideration by the State Assembly (Assembly Bill 894).

Why do people bully others?

There is no one reason why one person begins to bully another, but triggers can include any of the following:

- a feeling of incompetence in handling his or her own job
- a feeling of having missed out on a promotion
- a feeling that a highly competent and popular colleague may be a threat to his or her position
- a personality clash with a colleague
- personal problems at home that make the individual feel insecure and inadequate

How does bullying affect people?

Victims of bullying may experience significant physical and mental health problems, including:

- high levels of stress; post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

- financial problems due to absence
- reduced self-esteem
- musculoskeletal problems
- neurological disorders
- phobias
- sleep disturbances
- increased depression and self-blame
- digestive problems

How does bullying affect organizations?

Each of the individual consequences listed above can be very costly for the organization. Costs of bullying can fall into a number of categories:

- Replacing staff members that leave as a result of being bullied
- Work effort being displaced as staff cope with bullying incidents (i.e. work effort and energy directed away from productive work and towards coping)
- Costs associated with investigations and dealing with formal complaints and/or legal actions

Bullies do not run effective and healthy organizations. Staff turnover and sick leave may be high while morale and productivity may be low. Stress, depressions and physical health problems result in time away from work that is costly in terms of workers' compensation and lost productivity. The breakdown in trust in a bullying environment may mean that employees will fail to contribute their best work, do not give extra ideas for improvement, do not provide feedback on errors or failures and may be less honest about performance. Their behavior focuses instead on coping and "surviving".

What can I do to prevent bullying in the first place?

It is important that you have a policy and procedure to prevent bullying and to deal with it should it arise. Make sure your employees are aware of the policies and understand that they will be enforced. The policy should include the following:

- a clear statement explaining that bullying will not be tolerated and may be treated as a disciplinary offense
- specific examples of unacceptable behavior so that employees are clear about what will not be tolerated
- an outline of the responsibilities of supervisors and managers to prevent bullying
- practical steps for anyone who is concerned about bullying, or who is being bullied, to take to gather evidence of the problem
- details of how complaints will be handled and of the process that will follow
- assurance that anyone who assists in the investigation of a bullying offense will be protected from retaliation
- reference to disciplinary procedures

- the name of a manager or other staff member appointed to deal with instances of bullying—this can be useful for those who are being bullied by their own manager, as such victims may feel that they have nobody to turn to
- details of how the policy will be implemented, reviewed, and monitored

It is also important to emphasize that any information you receive related to bullying will be treated in confidence. You need to encourage employees to report their concerns without feeling that they are “tattling.”

What does bullying look like? What are the warning signs?

Bullying can take many forms, ranging from verbal abuse; threatening, humiliating, demeaning, belittling or offensive behavior; or interference with the victim’s work. It can include any of the following:

- spreading malicious rumors
- ridiculing or demeaning someone
- excluding people
- micromanaging or overbearing supervision
- threats
- persistent criticism
- use of profanity
- overt criticism directed towards an individual in a “public” setting
- withholding job-related information
- removing responsibilities
- overloading with work
- cruel joking

Bullying is often carried out by people in supervisory or lower management roles, which can make it difficult for you, the employer, to detect. Senior managers and business owners can easily become removed from the daily office banter and miss situations where bullying or exclusion could occur. For smaller employers without a designated HR person, it may be difficult for the senior manager/owner to examine the situation without being viewed as micromanagement themselves.

For all these reasons, it is important that you create a culture of respect that will not tolerate bullying, as well as develop a formal policy that employees can turn to if they are concerned about any inappropriate behavior.