

Bullying in the Workplace

Workplace bullying is the tendency of individuals or groups to use persistent aggressive or unreasonable behavior against a co-worker. Workplace bullying can include such tactics as verbal, nonverbal and even physical abuse. This type of aggression is particularly difficult because, unlike the typical forms of schoolyard bullying, workplace bullies often operate within the established rules and policies of their organization and their society.

How prevalent is it?

Statistics show that one in three employees personally experience bullying at some point in their working lives. Nearly half of all American workers have been affected by workplace bullying, either being a target themselves or having witnessed abusive behavior against a co-worker. In terms of gender, 57 percent of those who reported being the target of workplace bullying were women. Men are more likely to participate in aggressive bullying behaviors (60 percent); however, if the bully is a woman, her target is more likely to be another woman (71 percent).

What is the human cost?

Organizations are beginning to take note of workplace bullying because of the costs in terms of the health of their employees. Research indicates that workplace stress has significant negative effects that are correlated to poor mental and physical health, resulting in an increase use of “sick days” or time off from work.

Bullies react aggressively in response to provocation or perceived insults or slights. It is unclear whether their acts of bullying give them pleasure or are just the most effective way they have learned to get what they want. They lack insight into their own behavior, and seem unwilling or unable to moderate it, even when it is to their own advantage.

What are some types of workplace bullying?

Organizational bullying is a combination of reaction to pressure and corporate bullying. It occurs when an organization struggles to adapt to change, reduced income, cuts and external pressures.

Corporate bullying is where the employer abuses employees with impunity, knowing that the law is weak and jobs are scarce. Included here is coercion to work without breaks and vacations and regularly spying on employees.

Institutional bullying is similar to corporate bullying but arises when bullying becomes entrenched and accepted as part of the culture.

Serial bullying is where the source of all dysfunction can be traced to one individual who systematically picks on one individual after another, destroying them. This is the most common type of workplace bullying.

Secondary bullying is mostly unwitting bullying which appears when there is a serial bully in the department. The pressure of trying to deal with this dysfunction causes everyone's behavior to decline.

Pair bullying is serial bullying with a colleague. Usually, they are of opposite gender.

Gang or group bullying is serial bullying and usually involves scapegoating and victimization.

Regulation bullying is where a target is forced to comply with rules, regulations, procedures or laws regardless of their appropriateness, applicability or necessity.

Cyber bullying includes harassment by email, text messaging or persistent cell phone hang ups.

What are some workplace bullying tactics?

The following are the 10 most common tactics used by workplace bullies:

1. Falsely accuse someone of "errors" not actually made (71 percent)
2. Stares, glares, was nonverbally intimidating and was clearly showing hostility (68 percent)
3. Discounted the person's thoughts or feelings in meetings (64 percent)
4. Used the "silent treatment" to "ice out" and separate from others (64 percent)
5. Exhibited presumably uncontrollable mood swings in front of the group (61 percent)
6. Made up own rules on the fly that they did not follow (61 percent)
7. Disregarded satisfactory or exemplary quality of completed work despite evidence (58 percent)
8. Harshly and constantly criticizes having a different standard for the target (57 percent)

9. Started, or failed to stop, destructive rumors or gossip about the person (56 percent)
10. Encourages people to turn against the person being tormented (55 percent)

What can be done about workplace bullying?

Telling stories about workplace bullying is often challenging. Those who try to tell their stories to co-workers or supervisors often face accusations of being a “problem employee,” and are sometimes even blamed for the abuse they have experienced.

The following are eight tactics for explaining workplace abuse to decision makers:

1. Be rational. The appearance of rationality is a central feature of credibility in organizational settings. A key part of being rational is telling the story in a linear fashion.
2. Express emotions appropriately. The most credible narratives are those in which targets capture and communicate the emotionality of the bullying experience without displaying the emotions described. Targets are thought most credible when their body and voice project an aura of calm and reason.
3. Provide consistent details. Credible narratives are detailed and consistent. Targets who provide a number of specific, clearly articulated and memorable details regarding their experiences with the bully and their own perceptions and reactions are deemed most credible.
4. Offer a plausible story. The activities associated with one’s trauma need to be believable and familiar to the audience.
5. Be relevant. Be to the point. Because bullying causes such personal harm, both physically and emotionally, many targets’ first instinct is to fill their stories with discussion of the injustice.
6. Emphasize your own competence. Doing so helps establish the fact that the bullying is not a result of poor performance on the job and reinforces that target employees are not simply “problem employees.”
7. Show consideration for others’ perspectives. Targets who are deemed most credible demonstrate recognition in their stories that outsiders are likely to perceive them as “whiners” or that others might think the situation sounds “crazy.”

8. Be specific. Use concrete, specific language that renders explanations clear and easily understood. The least credible stories are vague and use indefinite pronouns such as “they” and “she,” to refer to multiple parties, and listeners have considerable difficulty following such stories.

Because workplace bullying is so prevalent, many countries have laws against this type of behavior in the workplace. In the United States, court action based on workplace bullying is problematic at best. Only five states have legislation against workplace bullying pending, and no state has ever passed laws against it. However, some states do have laws against creating or maintaining a “hostile work environment”. Many states also have general laws against harassment, but charges of harassment are notoriously hard to prove.

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Reference:

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