

## Workplace Bullying

Bullying is a phenomenon that has expanded beyond the school yard. It's an issue at which employers have begun to take a much more serious look, as the impact of workplace bullying on an organization and its employees can be quite serious. To better understand the problem, we need to define workplace bullying and identify the most likely perpetrators and victims.

Workplace bullying, like schoolyard bullying, occurs when one or more individuals use persistent aggressive or unfair behavior against a peer. Workplace bullying can include such tactics as verbal, nonverbal, psychological, and physical abuse and humiliation. Bullying in the workplace takes a wide variety of forms, including:

- ❖ Being rude or belligerent, snide comments intended to hurt
- ❖ Screaming or cursing
- ❖ Being quick to criticize and slow to praise
- ❖ Talking in a dismissive tone or "talking down" to others (e.g. "Let me phrase this in a way that even you can understand.")
- ❖ Having an arrogant attitude in general
- ❖ Destruction of property or sabotage of work projects
- ❖ Character assassination (i.e. purposeful intent to ruin someone's reputation, like spreading malicious rumors, gossiping, etc.)
- ❖ Purposely withholding necessary information, resources or amenities
- ❖ Social ostracism – intentionally excluding someone from conversations, social get-togethers, lunches, etc.
- ❖ Sexual harassment
- ❖ Physical assault<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Workplace bullying, Wikipedia. The Free Encyclopedia.



According to the Canada Safety Council, “Over 72 percent of bullies are bosses, some are co-workers and a minority bully [their] higher-ups. A bully is equally likely to be a man or a woman.”<sup>2</sup> Research by the Workplace Bullying Institute indicates that bullies often desire control, especially in highly-competitive and stressful environment, and harass others because of insecurities. In fact, their targets are often people who are more skilled and likeable.<sup>3</sup>

Not surprisingly, bullying behavior can have a major impact on a victim’s job satisfaction. Bullied workers become stressed at the thought of going to work, and if they do come, their concentration level and productivity suffers. And if this incentive isn’t enough to compel managers to stop workplace bullying, the fact that the company ends up bearing the direct cost of employee sickness, absenteeism, and lost work due to bullying stress should spur them into action.

Leaders and managers play a crucial role in the identification of both bullies and targets, and can be very instrumental in decreasing and preventing bullying behaviors. The problem is, when leaders or managers are bullies themselves, targets feel there is no other recourse than to fight back or to find another job – although most end up opting for the latter.

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<sup>2</sup> Bullying in the Workplace, Canada Safety Council, Canada’s Voice and Resource for Safety. Safety Canada (September 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Bullying Contrasted With Other Phenomena. Workplace Bullying Institute.

In view of its long-term psychological and financial costs for both employees and the organizations they work for, bullying behavior should be dealt with immediately. Many leaders and managers either fail to recognize the problem, take a dismissive attitude or are themselves the problem.



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“Leaders are responsible for the employees in their organizations and they must learn to identify and extinguish abusive behavior at an early stage before it suppresses their employees’ innovation and productivity, drives out their best workers, or turns into workplace violence” (Fisher-Blando, 2008).<sup>4</sup>

Below are guidelines from Canada’s National Centre for Occupational Health on how to deal with workplace bullying. These guidelines are adapted from the "Violence in the Workplace Prevention Guide" (2001) and the "Workplace Health and Wellness Guide" (2002).

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<sup>4</sup> Workplace Bullying: Aggressive Behavior and its Effect on Job Satisfaction and Productivity, Judith Lynn Fisher-Blando, February 2008.



## What to do if you are being bullied

If you feel that you are being bullied, discriminated against, victimized or subjected to any form of harassment:

### DO

- ❖ FIRMLY tell the person that his or her behavior is not acceptable and ask them to stop. Ask a colleague, supervisor or union member to be with you when you approach the person.
- ❖ KEEP a factual journal or diary of daily events. Remember, it is not just the character of the incidents - the frequency and pattern are also important. Make sure to record:
  - ❖ The date, time and what happened in as much detail as possible
  - ❖ The names of bullies and witnesses
  - ❖ The outcome of the event
  - ❖ KEEP copies of any letters, memos, e-mails, faxes, etc. received from the bully.
- ❖ REPORT the harassment to a HR manager, supervisor, or union leader. If your concerns are not taken seriously, proceed to the next level of management. Keep in mind that many governments have a labor standards department to help employees deal with various job issues.

- ❖ KEEP perspective. Don't generalize the bullying to the point that it affects your overall impression of the company.

### DO NOT

- ❖ RETALIATE. You may end up looking like the perpetrator and/or further instigate or escalate bullying.
- ❖ TAKE IT OUT on others. Not only is this unfair, but it also won't make you feel any better.
- ❖ BECOME PARANOID. Being a victim of bullying is a highly emotionally-charged situation, affecting one's emotional stability. Victims may begin to read too much into everyday interactions, make assumptions, and misinterpret benign behaviors of others under the impression that they've jumped on the bullying bandwagon.

## What an employer can do to deal with bullying

The most important component of any workplace prevention program is management commitment. Management commitment is best communicated in a written policy. Since bullying is a form of violence in the workplace, employers may wish to write a comprehensive, zero-tolerance policy that covers a range of incidents, from bullying and harassment to physical violence.

### A workplace violence prevention program must:

- ❖ Be developed by management and employee representatives.



- ❖ Apply to management, employees, clients, independent contractors and anyone who has a relationship with the company.
- ❖ Define workplace bullying (harassment, violence) in precise, concrete language.
- ❖ Provide clear examples of unacceptable behavior and working conditions.
- ❖ State in clear terms the organization's view of workplace bullying and its commitment to prevention.
- ❖ Precisely state the consequences of making threats or committing bullying acts.
- ❖ Outline the process by which preventive measures will be developed.
- ❖ Encourage reporting of all incidents of bullying or other forms of workplace violence.
- ❖ Outline the confidential process by which employees can report incidents and to whom.
- ❖ Assure no reprisals will be made against employees reporting incidents of bullying behavior.
- ❖ Outline the procedures for investigating and resolving complaints.
- ❖ Describe how information about potential risks of bullying/violence will be communicated to employees.
- ❖ Make a commitment to provide support services to victims, such as an Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

- ❖ Make a commitment to fulfill the prevention training needs of different levels of personnel within the organization.
- ❖ Make a commitment to monitor and regularly review the policy.
- ❖ State applicable regulatory requirements, wherever and whenever possible.

#### General tips for the workplace

- ❖ Regularly encourage and remind employees to act in a respectful and professional manner towards others at all times.
- ❖ Educate new hires about workplace bullying during onboarding process.
- ❖ Train supervisors and managers to recognize and deal with potential bullying situations. Encourage them to address situations promptly, whether or not a formal complaint has been filed.
- ❖ Include an impartial third party to help with resolution, if necessary.



The ability to recognize perpetrators or victims of workplace bullying isn't always clear-cut. One preventative measure that managers can take is to use personality assessments during the hiring process to learn more about candidates.

PsychTests' **AMPM (Advanced Multi-Dimensional Personality Matrix)** and **MEIQ (Multi-dimensional Emotional Intelligence Quotient)** can offer valuable insight into a person's character and motivations. ☘

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