

BULLIES AT WORK

We generally think of bullying as a schoolyard phenomenon. A stronger, more physically capable kid harasses a weaker one for money, homework, fun, or whatever personal gain.

It's hard to think of bullies at work. Or is it?

Think of bullying instead as a basic abuse of power. Somebody who has power holds it over somebody who does not, to oppress, harass, or intimidate that person.

If you've been employed longer than five years, you have probably seen this at least once, if not more, at work. It may have happened to you. In fact, it's so commonplace that employee unions have drawn up long, detailed definitions in case they need to take legal action. Research shows that over half of all employees have been bullied at some time during their careers. A search on the Internet for "bullying at work" brings 148,000 hits. It's a popular topic!

Everyone is at some time affected by stress at work. However, a bullied employee is more likely to suffer from stress, depression and anxiety than others. Not only does it affect the individuals being bullied, but it costs billions per year in sick pay, staff turnover, and loss of production.

So what can we do about it?

How to identify bullying

Before we take action, we need to know what it is. Most workplaces have a clear harassment policy, because that is often required by law. However, bullying is not quite the same as harassment, although the two behaviours may overlap, and many official government workplace health and safety definitions do not distinguish between them.

Bullying tends to be less obvious, and begins more slowly. Harassment can often be isolated to a single incident (for example, inappropriate gender-based comments like "Nice bum"). In contrast, sometimes bullying is seen as "good management". Let's take the example of the manager who is trying to increase production in his department. He might ask staff to work extra hours without overtime. At first, this is just a "favour", to get the department out of a "rough patch". Then he requires that it happens every weekend, so it becomes the norm. The economy is in recession, so people are scared of getting fired, and will do almost anything to stay.

Anyone who wishes not to take part might be made fun of in front of their colleagues, or his staff report on that person might be negative, even if they have legitimate reasons, such as family commitments, for not working over the weekend. This same employee is constantly criticised. They are not allowed to go on leave and are passed over for raise and promotion. He encourages others not to associate with this person during breaks, and tells everyone they are a "traitor" to the department - in a joking way, of course. But the stressful effects are quite insidious.

What causes bullying?

Bullies are not confident in their own ability, so they bully to hide their own inadequacy. If their subordinate or co-worker is the focus of attention, people are not watching the bully. A bully avoids responsibility for their own problems, so they project them onto others. The very act of bullying reduces their fear of being found out, because people do what they want and they feel powerful and in control.

How do deal with bullying

Professional bodies tend to agree on the correct way to deal with bullying in the workplace.

Communication in the workplace is key. First and foremost, every company should have a policy which makes it clear that bullying is not to be tolerated and there will be disciplinary consequences for bullies. HR people need training in taking care of both bullies and their victims, and they have to train the other employees thoroughly.

From induction, staff need to understand what bullying is and what it isn't. Employees must know what to expect so that strict management practice is not easily interpreted as bullying. They also need to know how they should handle the situation when they feel bullied. Colleagues of all employees should be encouraged to be on the lookout for bully behaviour aimed at others and help their workmates do something about it.

From the point of view of the bully, sometimes bullies are not aware of the effects of their behaviour and require support or counselling when something should be done but there is no need for disciplinary action.

Lastly, senior management needs to set a good example. People in companies tend to copy what the upper levels do. Kind but firm executives lead to kind but firm managers. Bullying executives produce bullying managers. The top guys form the culture that will accept bullying or not.

Summary and Conclusion

Everywhere you find some kind of power structure, you might also find a bully. They are not always easy to identify, because bullying often masquerades as more constructive behaviour, like tough management. But those who are bullied suffer a lot of stress and may get sick or resign as a result, resulting in a costly loss of knowledge skills from your workforce.

All companies should have a clear bullying policy to ensure that it is correctly identified and appropriate steps are taken if it occurs. All levels of the company need to be in support of the policy, and upper management really have to provide model behaviour, because they set the tone for the rest of the organization.

It's important to remember that people can only victimize you if you let them. So get to know your company's bullying policy and take action if you need to.

Some related links (copy-paste into your browser):

Bully Online – an online bully resource
<http://www.bullyonline.org>

Bully-Free at Work
<http://www.bullyfreetatwork.com/blog/>

Advisory, Conciliation, and Arbitration Service
<http://www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=1864>

Further reading:

Eggert, M.A., & Falzon, W. (2004). *Managing conflict pocketbook*. Alresford, Hampshire, UK: Management Pocketbooks.

Marchington, M., & Wilkinson, A. (2009). *Human resource management at work: People management and development* (4th ed.). London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

Namie, G., & Namie, R. (2003). *The bully at work*. Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, Inc.

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