

# Managing Bullying in the Workplace

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# Workplace bullying defined

Repeated, deliberate, health-harming mistreatment

- **Threatening, humiliating, or intimidating behavior**
- **Work interference**
- **Verbal abuse**

With the goal of exerting power  
over targeted individuals

# Financial costs of workplace bullying

Est. **\$275 Billion (US)**, \$36 Billion (AU), \$24 Billion (UK)

## Cost Variables

- Turnover
- Disengagement, disruption, productivity losses
  - opportunity lost, absenteeism, presenteeism
- Direct Costs
  - legal defense, dispute resolution, trial, settlements, administrative costs

# Prevalence of workplace bullying\*

48% of workers affected

- 27% targeted (7% currently or in past year)
- 21% witnessed, not targeted

4x more prevalent than illegal, discriminatory harassment

Average 22 months duration, 44% of cases > 1 year

\* 2014 study, 1,000 adult US workers (source: Workplace Bullying Institute)

# Who are the workplace bullies?

- **Boss 56%**
- Co-worker 33%
- Subordinate 11%
- (2007 = 72% boss, 18% co-worker, and 10% subordinate)
  
- **Male 69%** (compared to targets, 60% female)

# Impact of workplace bullying

- **77%** fired, quit, or forced to transfer  
(24% fired, 40% quit, 13% transferred)
- 23% of cases bully punished
- Effects on health, mental health, relationships also severe

# Targets' responses to bullying

- 40% say nothing
- 38% informal, internal complaint
- **22% formal complaint**
  - 15% formal internal complaint
  - 4% EEOC complaint
  - 3% lawsuit (< **10% victory** for targets)

# Do witnesses help?

- Usually do nothing, add to the problem, or leave
- Provide positive action less than 20% of the time  
(co-worker 15%, bosses 18%, HR 17%)
- Paralyzed by fear or repulsed



# Bully tactics

1. Blame for errors (undeserved)
2. **Unreasonable job demands**
3. Criticism of ability
4. **Inconsistent application of rules**
5. Threats to job
6. Insults and put-downs
7. **Discounting of accomplishments**
8. Exclusion
9. Yelling/screaming
10. Stealing credit

Repeated, deliberate, health-harming mistreatment with goal of exerting power over targeted individuals (verbal abuse, threatening/humiliating/intimidating behavior, work interference)

# Bully traits

- High on appearance, low on substance
- Lack insight about their deficiencies
- Deny responsibility, blame targets for provoking
- Workplace = battlefield
- **No intention of improving relationship with targets**
  - don't want them to succeed

# To thrive, bullies require

- Secrecy (of their true actions)
- Shame (on part of target)
- **Silent witnesses**
- Acceptance of unfair/ inaccurate criticisms as truth

# Workplace bully profiles

- Screaming Mimi
- Constant Critic
- Two-Headed Snake
- Gatekeeper

# Upward bullying

Repeated, deliberate, health-harming mistreatment with the goal of exerting power over targeted individuals (verbal abuse, threatening/humiliating/intimidating behavior, work interference)

**Target is in a higher position of authority** than the bully, but still finds it difficult to defend herself/ himself

- Bully has some real or perceived power over the target
- Target has dependency on the bully

# Forms of upward bullying

- Challenging/ disrespecting authority, including jumping chain of command
- Withdrawal of information/expertise
- Misleading information
- Not completing assigned work
- **Using org policies/procedures to disrupt disciplinary action**
  - Misuse of grievance system, use of harassment and disability claims

# Impact of upward bullying

- Managers isolated, stigma against seeking support
- Authority undermined
- Impacts credibility with senior managers as well as with staff/ direct reports
- **Wariness about addressing future performance issues**
- Affects entire work group and interventions more costly

# Ripe conditions for upward bullying

- **Flawed or nonexistent onboarding** for new managers
- New manager dumped upon with a “gift” employee
- Gift employee is a de facto manager
- **Upper management weak** or deliberately undermining of manager



# Steps to address bullying (upward)

- Provide comprehensive onboarding for new managers
- Support from upper management
- Ensure performance evaluations are conducted regularly
- Apply objective and consistent evaluation standards
- Strategically use performance improvement plans

# Steps to address bullying (orgs.)

- Develop anti-bullying policies (Sutton, 2010)
- Create a pro-civility culture (Porath, 2016)
- Make bullying a **performance issue, tied to demeanor**

Block rewards/ advancement, regardless of talent, task performance or reliability

**Document and punish *bully tactics***

# Steps to address bullying (targets)

- Name it
  - Put responsibility on bully, avoid analyzing motivations
- Seek respite, take time off to increase emotional strength
  - Assess if rights violated (internal policy, employment law)
  - Gather data about bully's economic impact
- Expose the bullying
  - Present to the highest level possible
  - Don't let unfair criticisms stand
- **Disarm the bully!**

# Resources

- Namie, Gary (2009). *The bully at work: What you can do to stop the hurt and reclaim your dignity on the job*. Sourcebooks, Inc.
- Porath, Christine (2016). *Mastering civility: A manifesto for the workplace*. Grand Central Publishing.
- Sackett, Jason et al. (2017). *Compassion@Work: Creating workplaces that engage the human spirit*. Silver Tree Publishing.
- Sutton, Robert (2010). *The No Asshole Rule: Building a civilized workplace and surviving one that isn't*. Business Plus.

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## Become masters over conflict, anger, and complaints

Decrease losses related to

- Grievances, legal claims
- Consumer abandonment
- Damaged brand, reputation
- Turnover, absenteeism

Empower leaders and staff with

- Confident communication
- Compassion, healing abilities
- Enhanced relationships
- Greater engagement

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