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.


Sackett, Jason et al. (2017). *Compassion@Work: Creating workplaces that engage the human spirit*. Silver Tree Publishing.

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