

Understanding the Characteristics of Workplace Bullying

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The personal and emotional effects of workplace bullying can make it difficult for you, as an employer, to remain impartial. It's especially difficult to be objective when you've received conflicting accounts of an incident from various colleagues.

It is therefore important to understand exactly what issues, actions, and incidents constitute workplace bullying. This will help you promote a consistent approach to tackling bullying in your business, and ensure that each reported case of bullying is dealt with fairly.

The key aspects of workplace bullying are outlined here, as well as some suggestions for tackling bullying in your business.

What You Need to Know

What is the difference between bullying and harassment?

Bullying and harassment are terms that are easily confused and often used interchangeably in the workplace. However, they refer to very different activities and need to be dealt with in different ways.

Harassment is a form of employment discrimination that violates the law. It is defined as "unwelcome conduct that is based on race, color, sex, religion, national origin, disability, and/or age." It becomes unlawful when it is either a condition of employment, or is severe or pervasive enough to create an intimidating, hostile, or abusive work environment.

Bullying is an intentional act that involves the psychological, and sometimes physical, abuse of one person by another or a group of others. At present, no federal or state laws specifically cover workplace bullying; and although some bullies do base their abuse on issues such as gender, race, religion, and physical ability, most instances of bullying focus on the victim's competency. Bullies are often insecure about a particular aspect of their own professional abilities, and feel threatened by colleagues who are competent in the same area(s).

Bullying is extremely difficult to identify as it is carried out covertly, and is not as public as most forms of harassment. This is especially true in the workplace, where threats and abuse can be delivered via e-mail and other non-verbal forms of communication.

When does criticism become bullying?

In order to be successful, a business must regularly review staff performance, productivity, and conduct. An element of these reviews will inevitably involve discussing areas where your staff are failing to meet requirements or are producing work of poor quality.

Criticism given in such circumstances does not constitute bullying if it is delivered appropriately, constructively, and respectfully. Constructive criticism from supervisors and management is part of the personal development of employees and the ongoing development of a business.

However, if senior staff takes criticism too far, it can cause other employees to feel victimized and under intense pressure. Top-down bullying by a senior colleague can manifest itself in the following ways:

- deliberately setting unreasonable and unrealistic objectives
- publicly criticizing a person's work without reason
- forcing employees to work long hours and overtime
- creating unmanageable workloads
- taking work away from someone

Again, these issues can be difficult to detect and quantify due to the emotional aspects involved. By recording all formal appraisals with colleagues, and agreeing on objectives and targets with managers and staff, you can help to prevent situations in which top-down bullying can occur.

What to Do

Identify Bullying In Your Workplace

Ways in which bullies intimidate and abuse their targets vary. Some are easier to identify than others. Workplace bullying, too, can take many forms; some of the more common examples are listed below.

- *Corporate bullying*, in which employers bully employees by imposing unmanageable working conditions and actively discriminate against employees who fail to comply.
- *Client bullying*: in which employees are bullied by their clients or customers. This occurs most often in customer service jobs, in which customers behave in an abusive, angry and sometimes violent manner toward staff who are trying to assist them.
- *Serial bullying*: in which one employee actively abuses one colleague after another. A serial bully tends to victimize one person until he or she suffers a breakdown, and either leaves the business or takes action against the bully—who then selects the next target.

- *Pair bullying*: in which two people bully a single victim. One bully usually takes the lead, while the other watches or aids in the abusive activities.
- *Gang bullying*: in which two or more people participate in a bullying campaign. Like pair bullying, one person tends to be the leader, while the others watch or are passively involved.
- *Regulation bullying*: in which one colleague forces another to comply with unrelated or obscure workplace regulations, or makes unqualified formal complaints about the victim's professional behavior.
- *Cyber bullying*: in which abuse takes place via electronic forms of communication, such as e-mail or the Internet. This can often be detected only if the victim reports the abuse. It is a form of bullying that has become increasingly common in modern workplaces that rely on e-mail to communicate with staff and customers.

These represent just some of the types of bullying that can occur, but indicate the range of opportunities and tools that bullies have to abuse their colleagues.

Minimize the Risk of Bullying Incidents

It is not the work environment, but the bully's own personality and insecurities that motivate him or her to bully a colleague. This makes it difficult for a business to prevent opportunities for bullies to operate.

It is therefore important to have measures in place that can help to deter bullies from abusing another colleague, and can enable victims to come forward to report bullying incidents. You can do this in the following ways:

- develop a formal anti-bullying policy that is discussed with all new and existing staff
- be an example of good behavior yourself
- treat every complaint or suspected bullying case fairly, impartially, and quickly
- ensure that all complaints are dealt with in confidence

Deal With Bullying Incidents

When dealing with any case of workplace bullying, sensitivity and discretion are of the utmost importance. It is, of course, necessary to support the victim; but you need to maintain an objective and impartial status while investigating suspected instances of bullying.

If reported cases are found to be true, there are several ways in which you can deal with a bullying incident. These include:

- *Informal approach.* Some cases of bullying can be handled by speaking to the bully and victim together, and agreeing on an appropriate way to resolve the complaints or behavior. Perhaps the bully is not aware, in a more minor case, of the extent to which his or her behavior affects another colleague. Discussing these issues informally provides an opportunity for the bully to rectify his or her behavior.
- *Counseling.* Counseling offers an opportunity for both the bully and the victim to discuss the bullying incident in more detail and in private. Staff can be trained to conduct counseling sessions in-house, or you can hire an objective professional to act as a mediator between the involved parties.
- *Disciplinary action.* In severe cases of bullying, disciplinary action up to and including terminating the bully's employment may be the only choice.

What to Avoid

You Don't Recognize the Signs of Bullying

Bullying can be difficult to detect, but ignoring or failing to recognize its signs will only compound the situation and alienate the victim further.

Look out for the following common signs:

- poor morale or working relationships within your organization
- increased or prolonged absences
- loss of productivity
- deteriorating customer relationships
- complaints or negative comments about senior staff members

You Become Emotionally Involved

Bullying is a very stressful and intense issue and one that can become extremely emotional. However, you must strive to remain objective and impartial when dealing with bullying in your business, in order to provide fair treatment for both parties.

If you are too close to, or work directly with, either party in a reported incident of bullying, you may need to ask another senior colleague to investigate the incident. Or you could enlist the help of external professionals, such as counselors or human resources personnel, to act as mediators and impartial observers.

Where to Learn More

Book:

Namie, Gary, and Ruth Namie, *The Bully at Work: What You Can Do to Stop the Hurt and Reclaim Your Dignity on the Job*. Sourcebooks, 2003.

Web Sites:

Bully Busters: <http://bullybusters.org>

Bully Online: www.bullyonline.org/resources/groups.htm#America

Workplace Bullying Institute: www.bullyinginstitute.org