

Ending Bullying in Your Workplace

Bullying doesn't end when you graduate from high school. Bullying, unfortunately, is also alive and well in the workplace. What exactly is workplace bullying? And what do employees, supervisors, and managers need to know about this troublesome behavior?

Defining Bullying

There are three concepts central to the definition of workplace bullying:

Workplace bullying is repeated and ongoing.

Generally when a person gets frustrated and yells at someone on occasion, that is not bullying. Bullying behaviors are ongoing, and over time become more frequent and aggressive. In fact, researchers say that a bullying incident must occur at least once a week for a period of six months for the aggressive behavior to be considered bullying.

Workplace bullying causes harm.

Bullying causes psychological and physical harm to targets and witnesses. They experience anxiety, depression, anger, discouragement, and even post-traumatic stress. This leads to poor sleep, gastrointestinal issues, inflammation, chronic pain, and other health problems.

Bullying creates an unequal power dynamic.

Bullying usually begins with an initial incident of aggression. If the target does not immediately

confront the behavior the bully will believe that the target will "allow" the behavior to continue. In the second aggressive incident the bully's ideas will be confirmed. With each incident the bullying becomes more aggressive, and eventually an unequal power dynamic ensues. The bully believes he or she has control over the target, and the target believes the same.

Describing Bullying

Bullying is all about perception. Two people could be treated exactly the same way by a boss, and one might consider the boss's behavior bullying while the other wouldn't be bothered. It is important for each person to think about what bullying means to him or her, however; bullying behaviors usually fall into three categories:

Aggression.

Insults, name calling, shouting/yelling, angry outbursts, invading personal space, aggressive body language, and harshly written emails could be considered aggressive.

Acts focused on humiliation.

Teasing, gossiping, spreading untrue rumors, sharing private information, playing harsh practical jokes and posting nasty comments about someone on social media are all humiliation tactics.

Sabotage.

Giving workloads and deadlines that are impossible to meet, changing tasks without notice or reason, removing tasks imperative to a person's job (leaving them feeling useless), and not providing information needed to do a job are all ways to sabotage someone's work.

Bullying is Costly

There are many factors of bullying that impact an organization's bottom line. Here are just a few:

Communication breakdown.

Bullies often use isolation or exclusion against their targets. For example, they may leave their targets out of meetings they should attend or off of emails they should be a part of. Second, targets won't likely ask a question if the person with the answer is bullying them. Either way, targets are left without all of the information and productivity is affected.

Absenteeism, presenteeism, low work quality.

It's difficult for people to produce quality work when they are bullied. In fact, targets take, on average, a full week more sick leave than employees who are not targets of bullying. In addition, when people are mistreated at work they spend a lot of time thinking about the mistreatment and avoiding the abuser.

Customer dissatisfaction and lost clientele.

Not only does an employee's work performance suffer when they are bullied at work, which in turn affects customers, The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) found that 11% of bullying incidents were committed against customers! In the digital age of social media, those unhappy customers are telling millions of other potential customers who may opt to take their business elsewhere.

Create a Positive Workplace

Employee assistance professionals can play a key role in preventing bullying to create a positive workplace for everyone. For bullying to end everyone in the organization has to make a commitment to respect, and focus on demonstrating effective communication skills:

Active Listening.

Listening and hearing are two different things. Hearing is a passive reception of sound while listening is an active process that involves processing information and responding appropriately to the speaker. Active listeners nod their heads or say, "uh

huh" to show they are listening, and paraphrase to ensure they understand. On average people only listen about 14% of the time. Why? Our own judgments get in the way. When we stereotype people, make incorrect assumptions, or have personal biases we certainly can't listen well. How can we be better listeners? Think of listening as an active, rather than passive, process. Resist and remove distractions, suspend judgment, avoid letting assumptions get in the way, and talk less so you can listen more.

Positive language.

There are two types of messages: validating or invalidating. Invalidating messages include interrupting or ignoring, shifting topics, avoiding a topic altogether, or acting aggressively. Being judgmental, asserting control or superiority over others, and being manipulative or stubborn are generally considered aggressive behaviors. On the other hand, validating messages offer recognition and acknowledgement, and display interest in the other person's ideas. Validating messages are descriptive, empathetic, impartial, and assertive.

Assertiveness.

Everyone should feel free to speak up when they have an idea or problem, or when they feel like another person is being disrespectful or uncivil. Assertiveness means you have the ability to clearly and non-judgmentally state what you feel, need or want in a tactful way. It includes three steps:

1. Validate the other person's point of view.
2. State your viewpoint or describe the problem.
3. State what you want in the form of an "I" statement, and offer a solution.

For example, you might say: "John, I understand that you are getting frustrated with me because of my mistakes (validation). But the way you're speaking to me right now is unprofessional and even aggressive (problem). In the future, I would like to be treated with respect (wants/I statement) since we are co-workers and have to work together (solution)."

Power of Bystanders

In order to have a positive workplace where everyone respects and is civil toward each other, everyone must commit to standing up for each other when they witness bullying. Research shows that education and intervention sessions that focus only on targets are not very successful, however; when bystanders feel empowered to intervene real change can happen! If co-workers hold each other accountable everyone benefits, and the workplace culture improves.

For Supervisors and Managers

Supervisors, managers, and other decision-makers are ultimately responsible for eradicating bullying and creating a healthy workplace culture. In order for all employees to consistently treat each other with respect, the leaders of the organization must hold everyone accountable.

Set an example.

You cannot be a successful manager if people are afraid of you, and it's difficult to hold people responsible for respectful workplace behavior if you're not practicing it yourself. As a manager or supervisor your choice of words, tone of voice, and body language is important to building a respectful workplace.

Detect bullies.

One way to detect bullying or other negative behaviors is through observation. Be aware of the climate within your own department at all times, and when someone steps out of line say something immediately. Other, more quantitative ways to detect bullying include exit interviews, 360-degree reviews, climate surveys, and communication audits.

Handle complaints.

Whether your handbook has a policy against bullying or not, grievances about bullying should be taken seriously and treated just like complaints of harassment. In fact, some research has indicated that bullying is more detrimental to a person than sexual harassment because it is often allowed to go on for

much longer periods of time since complaints of bullying are often ignored. When you hear a complaint about bullying, follow the same procedures you would if the complaint was about sexual harassment including conducting an investigation, documenting your findings, and making a formal decision about corrective action and resolution.

Ignite cultural change.

The culture of an entire organization is the responsibility of the leaders at the top. In order for organizational culture change to occur, the leaders have to get on board and set the change in motion. However, even if your leaders aren't on board with a major cultural overhaul, supervisors and managers can create and manage a positive culture within their own departments. Meet with staff and discuss the department culture. What would they like it to be? From there, develop action items and attach benchmarks to track success. Action items might include: developing a process for saying thank you to each other, holding monthly social gatherings, or developing a video that outlines the department's positive cultural values. Be creative – the options are endless. If even just one department starts focusing on positivity others will likely follow suit.

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