

Workplace Bullying: Costly and Preventable

By Terry L. Wiedmer

Workplace bullying is a pervasive practice by malicious individuals who seek power, control, domination, and subjugation. In businesses or schools, such bullying is an inefficient way of working that is both costly and preventable. Senior management and executives are ultimately responsible for creating and sustaining bully-free workplaces. Workplace bullies can be stopped if employees and employers work together to establish and enforce appropriate workplace policies and practices. This article presents information about workplace bullying, including its prevalence, targeted individuals, bullying behaviors, employer practices, and steps to prevent bullying. In the end, leadership and an environment of respect provide the ultimate formula for stopping workplace bullying.

Bullying occurs between and among people in all venues—in the home, community, and workplace. It is a pervasive, targeted, and planned effort that can be overtly obvious or can fly under the radar and is conducted by practiced and malicious individuals who seek power, control, domination, and subjugation. The impacts of such actions—in terms of finances, emotions, health, morale, and overall productivity—are destructive, and the ramifications are limitless (Mattice, 2009). Because no one is immune from the potential of being subjected to bullying in the workplace, this topic merits further review and analysis (Van Dusen, 2008).

To combat workplace bullying, often referred to as psychological harassment or violence (Workplace Bullying Institute [WBI], 2007), employers must have a full range of policies in place and means available to them to create and maintain a healthy workplace culture and climate. Although they are not generally for-profit endeavors, schools and school systems are purposeful businesses that share the same concerns and have the same responsibility to ensure that each employee works in a respectful environment and is not subjected to workplace bullies.

Workplace Bullying

According to the Workforce Bullying Institute (WBI), workplace bullying is the repeated, health-harming mistreatment of one or more persons (the targets) by one or more perpetrators that takes one or more of the following forms: verbal abuse; offensive conduct/behaviors (including nonverbal) which are threatening, humiliating, or intimidating; and work interference—sabotage—which prevents work from getting done. (Definition of Workplace Bullying, para. 1)

Bullies seek to induce harm, jeopardize one's career and job, and destroy interpersonal relationships. The behaviors of bullies harm people and ravage profits.

Prevalence of Workplace Bullying

Thirty-seven percent of U.S. workforce members report being bullied at work; this amounts to an estimated 54 million Americans, which translates to nearly the entire population of the states of Washington, Oregon, California, Nevada, Arizona, and Utah (Namie, 2007). These statistics are based on the August 2007 responses of 7,740 participants in the online WBI-Zogby U.S. Workplace Bullying Survey; the respondents comprised a sample representative of all American adults. The WBI-Zogby survey is the largest scientific study of bullying in the United States. Other key and depressing findings of the 2007 study included the following:

- + Most bullies are bosses (72%);
- + 60% of bullies are men;
- + 57% of targets are women;
- + Bullying is four times more prevalent than illegal forms of harassment;
- + 62% of employers ignore or worsen the problem;
- + 45% of targets suffer stress-related health problems;
- + 40% of bullied individuals never tell their employers; and
- + only 3% of bullied people file lawsuits. (WBI, Key Findings, para. 2)

These workplace bullying activities resulted in the targets reporting stress-related health problems such as debilitating anxiety, panic attacks, clinical depression, and even post-traumatic stress (WBI).

Another significant finding of the WBI-Zogby survey was that, in 72% of cases, bullies had control over the targets' livelihood and consequently used this leverage to inflict pain or to block transfers, thus forcing employees to quit or lose their jobs (Namie, 2007). In addition to having to leave a job or a profession of choice, other reported economic impacts imposed by bullies included the target being forced to transfer (13%), being discharged without reasonable cause (24%), and quitting to address a decline in health and sanity (40%) (Namie, 2007). Controlling bullies seek to make targets resign, which results in unemployment, loss of health insurance, and the inability to seek medical attention. Accordingly, the bottom line is that all members of society pay for the consequences of unacceptable workplace behaviors and practices. According to the WBI, workplace bullying is thus a silent epidemic.

Profiles of Targets

The WBI (2007) reported that 61% of bullying occurs within the same gender, and 71% of female bullies target other women. In 2000, a WBI study found that veteran employees—often the best and brightest, not the weakest—are often selected to be targets (WBI, 2010). Bullies typically target individual(s) they perceive to pose a threat. Skilled targets are often sabotaged by insecure bully bosses who take credit for the work of the targets, who are thus not recognized or rewarded for their talents and contributions.

Based on findings from thousands of interviews in 2000, the WBI researchers



Dr. Terry L. Wiedmer is an associate professor of curriculum in the Educational Studies Department of Teachers College at Ball State University, Muncie, IN. She currently teaches undergraduate teacher education courses and graduate courses specializing in supervision and instruction, staff development, and public relations. A 32-year member of Delta Kappa Gamma, Dr. Wiedmer belongs to Beta Mu Chapter, IN, and serves on the research committee. She is a graduate of the 1983 DKG Leadership Management Seminar, recipient of an Ola B. Hiller International Scholarship, and grantee of an Educational Foundation Self-initiated Study Grant. twiedmer@bsu.edu

confirmed workplace bullies typically target independent employees who refuse to be subservient. Furthermore, in 2010 WBI confirmed that targets were typically more technically skilled than the bullies and that they were the “go to” veteran employees from whom new workers sought guidance. Collectively, the targets were reportedly better liked, had more social skills, likely possessed higher emotional intelligence, and were appreciated by colleagues, customers, and management (bullies excluded) for the warmth and care they brought to the workplace (WBI, *Who Gets Targeted*). The principal weapons that bullying bosses and coworkers reportedly employed were alienating these targets from social interaction and withholding validation. As a result, coworkers often chose to separate themselves from the target out of fear of being the next victims (WBI, 2010).

Ethics and honesty are attributes often commonly possessed by targets. In particular, whistle blowers who expose illegal or fraudulent behaviors are most vulnerable to being bullied. Targets can be typified as morally superior to bullies due to their generally nonconfrontational, prosocial orientation focused on a desire to help, heal, teach, develop, and nurture others (Namie, 2007).

Practices of Employers and the Rights and Responsibilities of Targets

Employers have a moral and social responsibility to protect employees from bullying and to safeguard those who comprise their workforce. Employees need to be aware of bullying practices and knowledgeable about their rights and responsibilities, but ultimately managers and supervisors are the key players who are responsible for building and maintaining healthy and bully-free work cultures. When managers and supervisors commit time and effort to talk with their employees about the ecology of relationships in the workplace, employees better understand what factors foster the evolution of bullying. Such conversations can aid in policy refinement, improved employee guidance, and professional-development initiatives that contribute to a healthy and bully-free workplace.

Employees deserve and should be assured their place of employment is one where respect and civility prevail. Managers, supervisors, and other identified leaders of employees need to be foot soldiers to lead the fight against bullying—to identify bullies, to protect the bullied, and to intervene and stop bullying behaviors (Namie, 2007). Employees need to feel physically, emotionally, and socially safe and to believe they are valued and belong.

Practices of Bullies

Bullying is typically a series of calculated incidents that accumulate over time, carefully planned and executed by the bully to avoid legal grounds for grievance or disciplinary actions (Bully Online). Bullies may engage in some or all of the following behaviors toward their target(s):

- consciously undermine the position, status, worth, value, and potential;
- marginalize, ignore, overrule, and freeze out;
- set unrealistic (and even undesirable) goals, timelines, and expectations;
- distort, misrepresent, and twist anything said or done;
- single out, treat one differently from others, or ostracize;
- increase responsibility and simultaneously reduce authority;
- overload with work or have work taken away to trivialize existence;
- deny leave, even when provided for contractually;
- steal or plagiarize work and take credit for it;
- deny opportunities for training that are requisite for job performance; and
- coerce into leaving (constructive dismissal) through no fault of the target and

activate early or ill-health retirement (Bully Online, para. 2).

Profile of the Typical Workplace Bully

Bullies engage in predictable and recurring practices to debase and debilitate their targets (Bully Online). Individuals who engage in such uncivil and amoral workplace bullying tactics demonstrate common elements and behaviors. Are any of these behaviors evident in your workplace? If so, you, too, may be subject to potentially being bullied. Workplace bullies often

- + possess a Jekyll and Hyde nature (vindictive in private but charming in public);
- + display self-assuredness and certitude to mask insecurity;
- + portray self as wonderful, kind, caring, and compassionate, but actual behaviors contradict this self-crafted persona;
- + cannot distinguish between leadership and bullying behaviors;
- + counter attack and deny everything when asked to clarify;
- + manipulate others through guilt;
- + are obsessed with controlling others;
- + use charm and behave in an appropriate manner when superiors or others are present;
- + are convincing and compulsive liars in order to account for matters at hand; and
- + excel at deception, lack a conscience, and are dysfunctional (Bully Online, para. 3).

At times every employee may demonstrate one or more of these behaviors. The key, however, is to monitor whether or not the behaviors are recurring and predictable with an intended outcome to cause harm. The target must document and record accurately when suspected bullying occurs should a need arise to stop bullying behaviors.

Stopping Bullying

To stop bullying in the workplace requires time, input, policy changes, and a company culture that does not tolerate bullies. To help managers and supervisors maintain a civilized workforce and handle bullying, Alsever (2008) outlined and recommended the following five-step process: (a) understand what constitutes bullying and recognize it in action, (b) act fast to show that the company will not tolerate bad behavior, (c) enforce a clear action plan, (d) devise a policy for a civilized workplace, and (e) screen for bullies in the recruiting process.

Serial violators need to be identified and stopped in their tracks. Policies, rules, and practices must be in place to make workplaces safe and conducive to workers producing at peak levels. Bullying hurts the bottom line through lost productivity, low morale, the departure of experienced workers, and higher health care costs for stressed-out victims (Ceridian Services, 2008, para. 12).

Chief executive officers, including school superintendents, can ill afford to mislead their supervisors, managers, and human resource personnel about the level of bullying in their workplaces. Efforts to cover up bullying may include no reporting, under-reporting, leveling no punishment, dismissal of the bullied, and promotion of the bully (WBI, *How Bullying Happens*). Left unaddressed, bullying can rapidly evolve into a serious workplace health issue.

Steps to Take

To reduce workplace bullying effectively, employees need to know that they are supported. The bottom line is that the employer's return on investment is dependent on the work

produced in the workplace. If work is not completed successfully in a business, finances will suffer and the losses will inspire management to make adjustments. If workers in schools and school systems cannot be productive because of workplace bullying, the bottom line of student achievement is impacted. Thus, employers and school leaders need to take positive steps to address bullying with commitment and intensity.

First, put a policy in place. Second, address directly any reported or suspected bullying—regardless of who is reported. Third, identify resources and solutions and make them available to remedy a suspected problem. Those who manage and supervise employees ultimately represent and enforce workplace policies. They need to be competent and proactive in employee rights, as well as engage in leadership behaviors that create and enforce bully-free environments.

Put a policy in place. Workplace policies and procedures for addressing bullying may include disciplinary and legal consequences, additional supervision and oversight, training or counseling, and relationship-building activities. An extremely important aspect of policy and procedure is to have clear, detailed, and accurate documentation. Once reported, bullying incidents should be monitored and tracked over time to chronicle the incident reportage, steps taken, outcomes realized, and effectiveness of strategies employed. By tracking instances of transgression, employers can use the information gained to formulate preventative measures, identify alternative interventions, and guide professional development for all employees.

Employees and supervisors need to be aware of the most up-to-date policies and practices to ensure report assessment and implementation of appropriate actions. Timely implementation of policies is critical to initiate intervention, alert the parties involved, bring attention to the matter, monitor the situation, and address underlying, contributing problems. In extreme cases, it may be necessary to involve law enforcement officials.

As part of policy, employers should incorporate regular and ongoing climate assessments for all employees in order to record their perceptions of workplace bullying, and the results of these assessments should be made public. Recognizing their responsibility to stop and prevent bullying, employers must ensure that policies are clearly outlined to mandate that managers and supervisors not only report bullying acts but also work quickly to protect bullied employee(s) from retaliation and further harm while resolving the situation.

Address reported or suspected bullying directly. A tremendous disconnect often occurs between what employees and employers believe to be the existence and degree of workplace bullying. To resolve this discrepancy, or at least narrow the divide, employers must encourage and enable all members of the workforce to report possible bullying incidents in a timely manner and, even more importantly, ensure an expeditious, fair, and ethical review and evaluation of suspected bullying incidences. They cannot allow a code of silence—often prevalent in bullying cases—to exist. Positive and trusting relationships among adults and the knowledge that a concern will be taken seriously are critical

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Employees must be able to go to a person(s) who can be trusted and who will respond to the matter in a concerned, proactive, and supportive way. Having such a trusted individual is key, because all too often the bully is the supervisor. In the case of schools, employee options may include going to a department chairperson, principal, human resource officer, or the superintendent. Multiple avenues are necessary if the bullying is endemic, or it will be nearly impossible to achieve recourse and resolution. Friends and coworkers of bullied individuals need to feel free and safe to speak up when they witness bullying behaviors, and employers have a responsibility to support employees in identifying and resolving troublesome behaviors without violence. Workplace cultural norms can either foster or eliminate bullying, depending on how superiors react to supported or suspected incidents. In short, unless actions are taken to address the underlying work culture and climate conditions that precipitated or allowed for bullying, such behaviors will continue.

Even more importantly, employers must carefully guard workplace climate by recognizing that bullying seldom occurs in isolation. Aggressive or bullying individuals typically seek out and befriend like individuals. When managers and supervisors model bullying behavior in the workplace, they unfortunately serve to normalize workplace-bullying behaviors. In such settings, when the managers or supervisors are the perpetrators and when they ignore or minimize the situation, employees report a diminished allegiance to and effort expended in their workplaces. Similarly, managers and supervisors are often less proactive and persistent in addressing and resolving bullying behavior among employees when human resource managers and chief executive officers are less focused on enforcing policies.

Identify resources and solutions. Employee training and awareness of anti-bullying policies and procedures that comprehensively address the issue of workplace bullying are key. The message must be clear wherever bullying behavior may occur—the office, lunchroom, parking lot, classroom, assembly line, cell phone, or the Internet—it **will not be tolerated**. Employers must establish and publicize systems to support employees and to address bullying behaviors and interpersonal conflicts. For example, rather than fighting, shutting down, or giving in to a bully, targets need to stay engaged and do their work. They need to maintain a calm and professional demeanor, remain engaged and focused, and plan ahead to deescalate a situation before it occurs (Ross, 2007-2009). The success of the school or business depends on all employees knowing where they can go for assistance and on their learning and practicing necessary skills to address workplace bullying.

A Respectful Workplace

Cade (2010), a workplace-bullying expert, identified three things leaders can do to create a respectful workplace where bullying is not allowed to exist: (a) show appreciation, (b) treat employees like insiders, and (c) demonstrate empathy for problems. She further suggested that bullying rarely exists when all workers honor each other as valuable; treat one another with dignity; communicate to include, not exclude or control; are heard by another and respond with courtesy and curiosity; acknowledge thoughts and feelings; ask—do not order or yell or swear; provide clear and informative answers to questions that are legitimately their business; know the right to receive encouragement and support; speak of others positively; and seek to connect and build communication for all parties as opposed to positioning for control (Cade, 2010, para. 2).

Everyone's Responsibility

Elimination of workplace bullying is the responsibility of all employees; however, senior management and executives are ultimately responsible for creating and sustaining bully-free workplaces. In school settings, key leaders such as superintendents, human resource officers, principals, supervisors, and department heads must guide the educational workforce to recognize and report bullying within their ranks. By launching united efforts, defining and implementing clear policies, putting model practices in place, and having the courage to stand up against bullies, individuals in all lines of work can stop workplace bullying. The simple formula of combining leadership with an environment of respect will contribute to the well-being of all employees and make an improved and healthy work climate and culture a reality.

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