Why Workplace Bullying Should Not Be Ignored

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One November day in a magistrate court in the United States, a Chief judge upheld a jury's reward of $730,000 to an employee by the name of Celia Zimmerman who was suing her former company. The judge found that the "then president of the defendant company undertook a deliberate, calculated, systematic campaign to humiliate and degrade Celia both professionally and personally." In summary, the judge and jury determined that Celia had been bullied.

90,000 hours (roughly 33.3% of our lives) are spent at work yet despite this fact disturbing stories on the prevalence of adult bullying in the workplace are ignored (Adams, 1992). There are many names for it: bullying, incivility, disrespect, psychological abuse, purposely withholding business information, overruling decisions without a rationale, sabotaging team efforts, demeaning others, verbal intimidation and emotional harassment. Simply stated, workplace bullying is any negative behavior that demonstrates a lack of regard for other workers. The International Labour Organization's (ILO) definition of workplace violence includes the definition of bullying: Any incident in which a person is abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances related to their work. These behaviors can originate from customers or co-workers at any level of the organization.

The human resources department by definition has an intense primary focus on human resource. This means that they need to ensure the people are mentally, physically, and emotionally able to carry out their duties for the betterment of the company. Despite the extensive information on bullying and the adverse effect that it has on individuals, incidents of workplace bullying persist. Research over the years has shown that effectively handling workplace issues that disrupt employee productivity, morale, and attendance is vital to fostering a physically, psychologically, and financially sound work environment and business.

Targets of workplace bullying may also experience a range of destructive behaviors that are abusive and promote the use of power from those who bully. Some of the most widespread behaviors include "yelling, shouting, and screaming; false accusations of mistakes and errors; hostile glares and other intimidating non-verbal behaviors; covert criticism, sabotage, and undermining of one's reputation, use of put-downs, insults, and unreasonably heavy work demands" (Yamada, 2008).

Impact on The Employer

Human resources specialist Emily Bassman found that "employee abuse can have major bottom-line consequences" for employers, including direct costs, indirect costs, and opportunity costs (Bassman, 1992). Direct costs include a significant increase in medical and workers' compensation claims due to work-related stress and the costs of litigation emerging from abusive work situations. Indirect costs reflect the impact on employee morale and engagement, including "fear and mistrust, resentment, hostility, feelings of humiliation, withdrawal, play-it-safe strategies, and hiding mistakes" (Bassman,

1992). High turnover, absenteeism, poor customer relationships, and acts of sabotage and revenge may result from such environments, as well as opportunity costs reflecting losses from a worker's job effort falling "between the maximum effort of which one is capable and the minimum effort one must give to avoid being fired" (Bassman, 1992)

In consequence, if a culture of permissive workplace bullying exists, then the financial costs of utilizing a work preventive health program to address employee health problems may indeed be ineffective when employees work within this type of stressful environment.

Employers who ignore workplace bullying are in grave danger. Pamela Lutgen-Sandvik analyzed what she called the "communicative generation and regeneration of employee emotional abuse" and found that when bullying is left unaddressed by the organization, targets become more motivated to engage in retaliation and the likelihood of further aggression or violence increases (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003). This is compatible with the findings of organizational behavior professors Robert Baron and Joel Neuman, who have characterized overall workplace aggression as the "iceberg" beneath the "tip" of workplace violence (Baron & Neuman, 1998). At times, the link between bullying and violence at work can be very direct. According to workplace violence expert Joseph Kinney, "there have been numerous instances where abusive supervisors have baited angry and frustrated employees, pushing these individuals to unacceptable levels of violence and aggression" (Kinney, 1995, p. 132).

Impact on The Employee

Workplace bullying could foster further undesirable work environment situations, such as violence and severe incivility. In particular, deviant behavior is a potential result when employees perceive injustice or a lack of resolution in their employment circumstances. Furthermore, studies reveal that anger may be a collective workplace emotion, and thus, link anger to a host of unproductive workplace experiences that create a hostile work environment (Fitness, 2000). Researchers connect these harmful experiences to negative employee actions.

Research suggests that although workers who feel unjustly treated may not take direct or confrontational action to remedy the situation, they may take covert retaliatory action, such as theft or sabotage, in an attempt to 'get even' or to balance an inequitable situation (Fitness, 2000, p. 149).

Workplace bullying comes in many varieties, overt and covert, direct and indirect. It is intentionally hurtful, typically repeated, and often malicious. Common psychological effects include stress, depression, mood swings, loss of sleep (and resulting fatigue), and feelings of shame, embarrassment, guilt, low self-esteem, and even symptoms consistent with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Common physical effects include stress headaches, high blood pressure, digestive problems, increased risk of cardiovascular illness, and impaired immune systems. Targeted workers are not the only ones negatively impacted by this mistreatment. Coworkers who witness or learn of this behavior may become intimidated and fearful, experiencing anxieties that affect the quality of their work lives as well. Targets of severe bullying are likely to bring their experiences home with them, affecting family and social relationships.

Other Proven Psychological Effects of Workplace Bullying

- Mathiesen and Einarsen (2007) found that those who were deemed victims of workplace bullying exhibited lower levels of self-esteem.
- Bi6rkqvist Osterman and Hjelt-Bdck (1994) detected a significant relationship between harassment at work and depression.
- Research contends that positive affect is negatively correlated with depressive symptoms (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Therefore, a negative correlation will be found between workplace bullying intensity and positive affect.
- Birkqvist, Osterman, and Hjelt-Back (1994) concluded that victims of workplace harassment felt as though their personalities caused them to be bullied.
- Fenigstein and Vanable (1992) found a positive correlation between social paranoia and self-consciousness.

Prevention and Response

A sound organizational approach to workplace bullying should incorporate the following practices:

- **Organizational Leadership and Culture**

Organizational leaders must send a message that workplace bullying is unacceptable behavior. Executives and managers who preach and practice dignity will see that quality resonates throughout an organization. Establishing a culture of open, honest, and mutually respectful communication will have the salutary effect of reducing bullying and other forms of employee mistreatment. The presence of socially intelligent leaders will go a long way towards creating healthy organizational cultures. Social intelligence, according to Daniel Goleman, requires "being intelligent not just about our relationships but also in them" (Goleman, 2006, p. 11). Qualities such as empathy and concern for others are at the core of socially intelligent behavior. Managers should be educated about workplace bullying and authorized to handle concerns about bullying promptly and fairly, and they should be supported by their employers when they do so.

- **Education and Policies**

Workplace bullying should be included in employee education programs and employment policies. Over the past decade, concerns about sexual harassment and workplace violence have dominated discussions about counterproductive behavior in the workplace and led to training programs and company policies addressing these behaviors. Although workplace bullying is a more serious problem in terms of pervasiveness (and sometimes in severity), by comparison, it has been sorely neglected by most employers. Gary Namie of the Workplace Bullying Institute recommends that employers adopt a comprehensive blueprint to address bullying (Namie, 2003). This approach should include a "values-driven policy," "credible enforcement processes," "restorative interventions" for targets and offenders, and "general and specialized education" (Namie, 2003).

Indicators of workplace bullying and employee discord

- Sharp increases in attrition and absenteeism and declines in productivity after a supervisory change;
- Sudden actual or alleged reductions in performance by workers with otherwise consistently satisfactory work records;
- Declining employee morale after downsizing, merger, and reorganization situations;
- Heightened levels of interpersonal aggression levels of all types, regardless of the situation.

Employers must understand that the worst bullies are often very good at covering their tracks. Also, legitimate fear of employer retaliation or indifference often causes targets to remain quiet about their experiences. In such instances, circumstantial evidence may be the only outward signs that bullying is a problem in an organization.

Workplace bullying is defined as an act that is not a blatant attempt to harm but causes distress (Cortina, Magley, Williams, and Langhout, 2001). People have lost their careers, livelihoods, and health due to these destructive behaviors, and too many others in positions of power and influence have chosen to ignore their pain and torment. Workplace bullying has always been there and has mostly been ignored. It is high time to put a stop to that.

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