

The Bully at Work

49 percent, almost half, of all working adult Americans have reported they have either been bullied or have witnessed bullying in the workplace.

Source: 2007 WBI-Zogby survey results

Bullying doesn't end in the school yard. With almost 50 percent of the adult working population acknowledging that they have either been bullied, or witnessed bullying, it's apparent many individuals carry bullying behaviors into adulthood.

Unlike harassment, bullying is not illegal in the U.S., although there are bills in some state legislatures that seek to change this by calling for a Healthy Workplace Bill. But even without laws, managers and HR professionals need to be tuned into bullying behaviors, as bullying drags down company morale, causes higher turnover, lowers productivity, costs more in sick days and in worker's compensation claims.

Employers also need to be concerned about losing their best employees. Often, it is the least skilled employee who attacks the best and brightest workers because of a perceived threat.

What does bullying look like in the workplace?

Bullying includes repeated behaviors that intimidate, degrade, offend or humiliate a worker, often in front of others. A single incident might be classified as an aggressive act or isolated act of violence, but bullying is different in that it is an on-going, repetitious behavior. The bully may be a person abusing or misusing power, but many bully situations involve employees bullying their peers, rather than a supervisor bullying an employee.

What is the impact on the bullied employee?

Employees who are bullied usually experience physical and mental health problems, including high stress, financial problems, poor self-esteem, depression, phobias, sleep disturbances and digestive problems. These

employee issues may evolve into additional, and costly, expenses for the organization, such as replacing staff members who leave as a result of being bullied; work efforts being displaced and interrupted as staff cope with bullying incidents (efforts are redirected from productivity to coping mechanisms); and costs associated with investigations of ill treatment and potential legal actions.

What can be done to address bullying in the workplace?

Organizations can limit the chances of bullying in the workplace by creating a zero-tolerance anti-bullying policy. This policy should be part of the company's "big picture" in terms of a safe and healthy work environment. Other steps to take include:

- Immediately addressing bullying behavior when witnessed or reported.
- Establishing an "open door" policy for reporting bullying; establish an independent contact for reporting (e.g., HR contact).
- Structuring the work environment to give employees a sense of autonomy, present opportunities for individual challenges and mastery, and develop clear task expectations.
- Including employees in the decision-making processes where appropriate.
- Educating employees about bullying and how it differs from incidents of violence and harassment.
- Managers taking an active role with their staff, rather than being removed from them.
- Commitment should be "from the top down" about what is and is not acceptable behavior.

Workplace Factors That Increase Risk for Bullying

- Significant organizational change, major restructuring, technological change.
- Troubled workplace relationships, such as inadequate flow of information between organizational levels or lack of employee participation in decisions.
- Conflicts within work systems – lack of policies about behavior, high rate/intensity of work, staff shortages, interpersonal conflicts, organizational constraints, role ambiguity and role conflict.

Ease@Work can help your organization with harassment and bullying behaviors. We have the experts who can facilitate all staff training, manager/supervisor specific sessions and even mediation between discontent parties. **Call your account manager at 216.241.3273 for a consultation.**



WE KNOW PEOPLE

Communication Coach

We know people! EASE@Work is connected to an extensive network of specialists who support the unique needs of Human Resources.

If you're not sure if we can help you with your needs, just ask!

Here's an example:

Mary had always been an active participant in department meetings, but recently the division supervisor, Jane, thought she seemed quieter and had not been contributing as much. Yet, one-on-one, Mary remained open and communicative. Jane was puzzled about the changes in Mary's behavior when with the group and made a note to herself to pay more attention to the meeting dynamics.

At the next meeting, Jane noticed that John, a mid-level manager who had transferred in from another department, dominated the discussion. Jane then specifically asked Mary to share her thoughts on the topic, as Jane and Mary had had a brief discussion on the issue earlier in the week. At that point, Jane noticed Mary's hesitation to speak. She also noticed that John crossed his arms and rolled his eyes while Mary was speaking.

Jane continued to monitor the situation outside of the meeting to make sure John's behavior with Mary was not an isolated incident. It became clear that John was not communicating as a manager in the manner he should be in order to meet department goals. Jane documented the incidents and then called Ease@Work for a consultation to decide how to best handle the situation.

Through a discussion with the Account Manager, it was decided to provide John with some coaching on communication, including the impact of body language. Ease arranged for a series off-site sessions for John with a communications coach; these sessions were planned to address specific goals and outcomes regarding improvement in John's communication skills with his staff.

Q: I have noticed three people in my department seem to laugh a lot, usually when one other employee is around. When I've walked over to the group, they act like they're joking around, but the one employee doesn't look like she's having fun. Should I be worried about this?

A: Yes. Co-workers having a laugh together is one thing, but if the singled out employee doesn't think it's funny, that's bullying and could move into the realm of harassment depending on the nature of the comments. When several employees gang up on one, that's a form of "mobbing" and the situation should be investigated further. If you find that the singled out employee is in fact being bullied (or harassed), management should address the perpetrators' behavior immediately.

And remember, if you have questions about whether a management referral is appropriate or not, your account manager or an Ease@Work clinician is available to consult with you on a case-by-case basis. Just call us at 216.241.3273 or 800.521.3273.

HR Rocks!

The 39th Annual Ohio Human Resource Conference starts on Wednesday, Sept. 21, 2011 and runs through Friday, Sept. 23, 2011. The event is being held at Kalahari Resort in Sandusky, Ohio and is chaired by the sensational Steve Browne, SPHR. The program has been approved for 17.25 credit hours toward PHR and SPHR recertification through the Human Resource Certification Institute (HRCI).

Be sure to stop by the Ease@Work exhibit and say "Hello" to Patrick Gaul, Ease@Work Account Executive.

For more information, go to http://www.ohioshrm.org/hr_conf/program.cfm.