



COMBAT BULLYING IN TOXIC WORKPLACES

Psychologists Shoba Sreenivasan and Linda Weinberger explain the causes of toxic environments, why bullying is frequently ignored and how to take a zero-tolerance approach to office bullies.

Wait – adults don't bully each other at work. That's playground behaviour, right? Wrong. In fact, the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (Acas) has said that bullying is a serious problem in Britain's workplaces; according to data from November 2015, they receive 20,000 calls related to workplace bullying and harassment each year.

The most commonly used definition of workplace bullying is that of psychologically abusive and intimidating behaviour. Bullying can be expressed directly in the form of verbal aggression and unreasonable demands, or expressed indirectly by sabotage, or rumour mongering. Bullying behaviour can have an insidious and long-standing impact on the organisation, the targets and their families.



What creates toxic workplace environments?

Consider these behaviours:

- Targeting an employee for sarcastic comments in meetings
- Unrealistically heavy workloads
- Demands to forego long-planned

holidays, or be available to take on others' shifts or workloads

- Micromanaging and then punishing the employee for failing to meet ill or undefined standards
- Withholding information or vital resources.
- Demotions implied if there is failure to comply with high demands
- Gossiping or spreading rumours about an employee

There may be external pressures, such as downsizing, cost increases, demands for greater productivity or restructuring initiatives that are antecedents to bullying. Managers tend to be the most common workplace bullies.

Where does bullying thrive?

Management literature has identified leadership styles where bullying can flourish:

- Use of pressure and intimidation to achieve results
- Unreasonable workload demands
- Passive or laissez-faire styles
- Ignoring or avoiding conflict
- Inconsistent or ineffective application of policies against bullying
- Minimising seriousness of bullying



What are the costs of workplace bullying?

Rudeness and dismissiveness of subordinates may be considered in some work environments to be 'part of the business world' and that those who succeed 'develop thick skins'. Yet, workplace bullying comes at a high cost to the employer, the larger economy, the worker and the family of the bullied employee.

Costs to the employers:

- Absenteeism
- Turnover/attrition
- Lost productivity
- Lack of creativity
- Legal costs
- Damaging the 'brand'

Costs to the overall economy:

- Reduction in employment
- Reduction in productivity

Costs to the employee

- Low morale/demoralisation
- Loss of self-confidence,



frustration and helplessness

- Physical health effects (most commonly cardiac problems, high blood pressure, headaches and poor concentration)
- Mental health effects (such as depression, anxiety, risk for suicide and alcoholism/substance abuse)
- Increasing the risk for workplace violence

Costs to the family of the employee, as the stressed parent creates a stressed family unit:

Spouses can experience:

- Marital conflict and risk of domestic violence
- Anxiety and depression
- Lowered productivity at their workplace

Children can experience:

- Failing classes/poor grades
- Behavioural problems with peers/in school
- Depression, anxiety and sleep problems

What are common approaches to dealing with workplace bullying?

The burden of dealing with workplace bullying commonly falls on the bullied individual. The efficacy of filing grievances or using employee assistance programmes to resolve conflicts is dependent upon how seriously the workplace takes the complaint. Unfortunately, there is a tendency to have workplace bullying dismissed as personality conflicts or to characterise managerial styles as strong rather than

aggressive, leading to underestimation of the impact of such behaviour, and failure to resolve the issue. The bullied employee who has not prevailed in their complaints may face being ostracised, be labelled as a troublemaker, experience reprisals or fear loss of employment – or actually lose employment. Such an approach only serves to create a climate that victimises the victim and sends a potent message to other employees: do not complain.



Promoting a culture of trust

The processes mentioned only serve to create employee demoralisation. An identified good practice approach, supported by the literature and practical applications helps to promote a culture of trust. Acas's policy paper, *Seeking better solutions: tackling bullying and ill-treatment in Britain's workplaces*, identified these organisational-level solutions:

- Managers educated on what constitutes bullying actions and code of conduct
- Support and assistance to those being bullied, eg via HR or health staff
- Empowering employees to talk about unacceptable behaviour
- Flagging bullying at an early stage
- Consequence-free reporting
- Encouraging informal resolutions



Zero-tolerance for workplace bullies

Employers and organisations should not tolerate workplace bullies, yet despite the identified costs of bullying, employers still commonly deny, discount, encourage, rationalise or defend workplace bullying.

Achieving zero-tolerance for bullying requires active efforts on the part of employers that move beyond issuing policies against it. In public sector or large organisations, addressing workplace bullying may become mired in a lengthy bureaucratic process during which time the bullied employee remains under the thumb of the bully. Given employers' lack of responsiveness, the most immediate remedy to the pernicious effects of workplace bullies – as with school bullies – may be to create a zero-tolerance public awareness movement against them.



References

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