# BULLIES IN THE WORKPLACE: A FOCUS ON THE "ABUSIVE DISRESPECT" OF EMPLOYEES

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*"Bullying is the sexual harassment of 20 years ago; everybody knows about it, but nobody wants to admit it".*

—*Lewis Maltby (Russell, 2001)*

The purpose of this paper is to review the current research and literature about workplace bullying, to provide information about how organizations can learn to more quickly identify bullies and to suggest ways of dealing with these toxic people so that the corporate culture is not negatively impacted by their behavior.

## Overview

To be successful, organizations must create an atmosphere that inspires both innovation and risk-taking. In an increasingly competitive global economy, such innovation is more important than ever before (Hamel, 2000). However, not only does workplace bullying stifle productivity and innovative practices, but bullies often target the organization's most talented employees—those individuals who are generally the most threatening to bullies (McCord & Richardson, 2001). As a result, the creativity and productivity of the organization's most talented human capital is often negatively affected by this type of behavior at work or, worse yet, good employees are driven out of the company altogether.

Bullies are often hard to identify because they operate "under cover"—that is, on the surface they appear to be civil and cooperative, while they do everything in their power to undermine those they target for destruction.

There is much more discussion and research about the issue of workplace bullying than ever before; however, there is no specific legislation in the United States that outlaws such behavior. Companies simply cannot wait for new laws to be enacted before they tackle the issue of bullies at work; the price is just too high.

## What Is Workplace Bullying?

### Individual Bullying

According to the Workplace Bullying and Trauma Institute, workplace bullying is "the repeated mistreatment of one or more employees with a malicious mix of humiliation, intimidation and sabotage of performance." Like childhood bullying, workplace bullies use aggressive or unreasonable behavior to achieve their ends (Wickipedia). Bullying behavior can exist at any level of an organization—bullies can be superiors, subordinates, co-workers and colleagues (Davenport, Schwartz & Elliott, 1999).

Instead of using physical means, however, workplace bullies often operate within the established rules and policies of their organization or their society.

For example, a workplace bully might use the office "rumor mill" to circulate a lie about a co-worker strictly for the purpose of creating a problem for that individual. An employee who dislikes a co-worker for personal reasons may incessantly criticize everything that the individual does or says. While such actions are not necessarily illegal and may not even be against the policy of many organizations, the damage that such actions cause—both to the targeted employee and to workplace morale—is significant.

### *Group "Mobbing"*

Mobbing (group bullying) occurs where one bully, "through innuendo, rumors and public discrediting" creates a hostile environment for the targeted person and "gathers others to willingly or unwillingly participate in continuous malevolent actions to force a person out of [a job or] the workplace" (Namie & Namie, 2000). When the mobbing behavior finally does result in resignation, termination or early retirement from a job or the workplace, the targeted person is portrayed as being at fault and "voluntarily" leaving (Ibid). Mobbing in an organization has been likened to a cancer in that "beginning with one malignant cell, it can spread quickly, destroying vital elements of the organization" (Ibid).

### Prevalence of the Problem—Why Should Anyone Care?

Popular media such as *Time* (Labi, 2001), *Management Today* (Kennett, 2001) and *Psychology Today* (Bertucco, 2001) have all featured stories concerning bully pervasiveness, indicating that as many as 21 percent of all U.S. workers have likely been targeted directly by office bullies (Keashly & Jagatic, 2000; Namie & Namie, 2000). In workplace situations involving bullying, 81 percent of the bully behavior is attributed to employees operating in a supervisory role (Namie & Namie, 2000).

According to recent statistics, bullying in the workplace is three times as prevalent as illegal discrimination and occurs at least 1,600 times as much as workplace violence. In fact, one out of six individuals report being bullied at some time at work during their careers. Bullying is also more common than sexual harassment or verbal abuse (Workplace Bullying and Trauma Institute).

## Why Do Some People Bully Others?

Bully behavior ranges from blatant demonstrations of aggressive screaming, yelling and threats to subtle, underhanded displays. Making unreasonable job demands, criticizing abilities and excluding targeted employees from meetings and relevant information are all activities found in the bully's repertoire (Namie & Namie, 2000). Research on bully behavior and harassment concludes that bullies, like harassers, are driven by a need for power and control and choose to seek out a perceived weaker employee to dominate (Namie & Namie, 2000; Kurth, Spiller & Travis, 2000).

The corporate world, in which workplace bullies thrive, is established according to the white male experience and represents an extension of the military and sports models followed by men for generations (Corsun & Costen, 2001; Harragan, 1977; Hornstein, 1996). "Organizational power hierarchies, competitive work climates and the bunker mentality of contemporary corporate life all provide a hospitable environment for the toxin of disrespect, and even induce it, from bosses who would otherwise be just" (Hornstein, 1996).

According to Corsun and Costen (2001), competitiveness and the desire to dominate are understandable consequences of the existing corporate system. "The corporate office is the habitat of the powerful. Corporate America is the kind of place that is natural for white males. The game of business has a unique military-sports theme, the roles of which were established years ago by white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant male 'captains of industry.' The military influence is evident in organizational form and structure, whereas the organization's function (to win the game or make a profit) is influenced by team sports."

The bully's goals parallel those found both in military battles and in sports arenas; competition is the ultimate game in the bully's mind and winning requires a singular focus (Brunner & Costello, 2003). To win, bullies believe that their targets must be beaten up and eliminated (Namie & Namie, 2000). Many managers who use these bullying techniques are viewed as effective and are rewarded for their "take-no-prisoners" style of tough leadership (Russell, 2001). Other motives that have been given for bullying are laziness, prejudice and a fear of being outperformed (Wickipedia).

## Who Are the Players?

### *The Bully*

Bullying is not about being "tough" or insisting on high standards (Hornstein, 1996). It is about "abusive disrespect" (Ibid). Hornstein identifies three prevalent types of bully personalities: conquerors (bullies interested in power and control and "protecting their turf"), performers (bullies who suffer from low self-esteem yet belittle their targets) and manipulators (bullies who are self-interested and vindictive, often taking credit for the work of others and never taking responsibility for their own mistakes).

Bullying is not about a "clash of personalities," a "misunderstanding" or "miscommunication" (Namie & Namie, 2000). Surveys about workplace bullying conducted by Namie & Namie (2000) have identified the following bully profile: (1) bullies use surprise and secrecy to gain leverage over those targeted; (2) they are never interested in meeting someone else halfway, so trying to negotiate with a bully is useless; and (3) they routinely practice psychological violence against specific individuals (through putdowns, belittling comments, name-calling, constant criticism, blame, sabotage, stealing credit, cutting the individual out of the communication loop or

through angry outbursts intended to intimidate). In almost every instance, the bully's actions will negatively affect the targeted individual on an emotional level.

According to research by Namie & Namie (2000), bullies are usually inadequate, defective and poorly-developed people who start the conflict and trouble at work and tend to be liars and cowards. Though it may be expected that much of the bullying is perpetuated by males, this does not appear to be the case. According to the *U.S. Hostile Workplace Survey* (Namie, 2000), men and women are equally responsible for the bullying behavior that occur in the workplace.

### *The Target*

For purposes of this paper, the victims of a bully's tirades are referred to as "targets." According to Namie & Namie (2000), targets are empathetic, just and fair people who react to a bully's behavior but do not initiate such actions and do not deserve or want the attention of the bully.

Some statistics indicate that women are at only a slightly higher risk of getting bullied at work (Smith, Singer, Hoel & Cooper, 2003). However, the *U.S. Hostile Workplace Survey* (Namie, 2000) reported that 84 percent of employees targeted for the bullying abuse were female and that, surprisingly, women bullies targeted women employees more often than they targeted males (Namie, 2000; Namie & Namie, 2000).

### *The Organizational Bystanders*

Within an atmosphere of fear and mistrust, other employees may experience feelings of helplessness and a lack of control. They may spend time worrying about whether they will be the next target. Most employees understand that

challenging the status quo likely involves significant risk. As a result, instead of protesting the behavior, employees on the sidelines often rally in support of the bully out of self-protection and fear of reprisal, thus weakening the possibility of the target forming support coalitions (Namie, 2000).

## Common Bully Tactics

According to Field (1996), there are over 75 different types of bullying behaviors. These actions range from social bantering to teasing, verbal abuse, blame, humiliation, constant criticism, monopolizing supplies, gossip, "ghost" gripes that are not true, stealing the credit for work performed by the target, personal and professional denigration, overt threats, harassment (e.g., racial or sexual), manipulation of job specifications, assignment of an unrealistic workload, aggressive e-mails or notes, professional exclusion or isolation, sabotage of career and financial status, whistleblower attacks, blackmail, overt aggression/violence, criminal assault and murder.

Bullies seldom rely on just one tactic and almost never resort to violence, as they know that this may cost them their job. Most bullies have learned to combine several different tactics in an organized assault on the target—a preferred strategy by many bullies is to combine isolation of the target with gossip, leaving the target employee vulnerable and unable to defend him or herself.

## Results of Bullying—The Damage and Costs

The literature in the United States is fairly limited; however, the United Kingdom has taken a lead in the field of workplace bullying in terms of both research and legislation. British research shows that one-third to one-half of the stress-related illness reported in Great Britain is due to workplace bullying (Bullying.com). It is estimated that 40 million working days are lost

each year due to workplace bullying, more than 160 times the number of days lost through strikes in the UK (Ibid). In addition, 25 percent of targets simply leave their job without providing any feedback to the organization, and 20 percent of the silent witnesses to the bullying behavior voluntarily resign, also without feedback (Ibid).

### Damage to the Target

The research is overwhelmingly consistent in reporting that bullying behavior leads to real and serious physical and emotional problems for the targets, including damage to their self-esteem and confidence, anxiety, depression, gastrointestinal disorders, headaches, insomnia, exhaustion, poor concentration and substance abuse (Namie & Namie, 2000; Davenport, Schwartz & Elliott, 1999; Hornstein, 1996). In addition, according to the *U.S. Hostile Workplace Survey* (Namie, 2000), 82 percent of bullied employees lost their jobs and 38 percent left voluntarily following the abuse. The target that chooses to stay in the organization may experience a drop in productivity, effectiveness and future opportunities for advancement (Brunner & Costello, 2003).

### Damage to the Company

Long-term costs to the organization include health care costs, legal costs, time lost in preparing or attending court cases, a reduction in productivity and the expense associated with replacing staff. The less visible yet still significant costs associated with workplace bullying include the time and expense of internal employee complaints, mediation, adverse publicity, the loss of talent, lower morale among employees, absenteeism, reduction of efficiency, productivity and profitability, loss of collective wisdom and experience, and a damaged public image that may make it more difficult to attract key talent in the future (Bullying.com).

In addition to these overt and covert costs, the Canada Safety Council (Institute of Management and Administration, 2001) estimates that up to 52 percent of a target's day is devoted to counter-bully tactics such as building a defensive network, developing counteractive strategies or seeking political allies. As a result, productivity is likely to be affected—not only for the target, but also for those around him or her.

**Current Legal Protections and Pending Legislation**

As previously noted, researchers are beginning to spend more time on the issue of workplace bullying. Legal remedies will, no doubt, follow once the problem and its prevalence become more understood. Currently, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 permits relief for protected classes based upon a theory of a "hostile work environment" (see *Harris vs. Forklift Systems, Inc.* and *Rogers vs. EEOC*); however, the law does not protect victims of bullying behavior unless they are members of a protected class who might be able to establish a claim against their employer under existing discrimination laws. Federal courts have not yet extended the hostile workplace doctrine to prohibit workplace bullying conduct based on characteristics other than sex, race, national origin, etc.

The preferred avenue for employees seeking relief for abusive treatment in the workplace has been the state common law tort claim of intentional infliction of emotional distress (McCord & Richardson, 2001). These types of cases are, historically, difficult to win; however, they do provide at least a possible avenue of relief for the victims of workplace bullying.

In addition, the bully can also be sued individually for his or her own intentionally tortious conduct. The employer would also be liable for the

intentional acts of its employees if it knows of the bad acts and takes no action to eliminate those acts or discipline the offending employee. Punitive damages are available for tortious acts committed maliciously or oppressively (McCord & Richardson, 2001).

## Common Management Mistakes

Unfortunately, the organizational response to bullying behavior is fairly predictable and not always on target. Following are some typical management mistakes encountered when dealing with a bully at work (Namie & Namie, 2000; Hornstein, 1996):

- ✓ Management often seeks to appease the bully by assuming that his or her aggressive behavior will cease when the bully is given what he or she desires. This often results in a short-term elimination of the behavior, but the bully usually resumes and sometimes escalates the aggression when he or she wants something else.
- ✓ Management often blames both of the parties involved in the situation, with the target being blamed for not getting along with the bully. Usually there is no credence given to the possibility that the bully may be purely to blame.
- ✓ Sometimes management will blame only the target in an effort to stop the target from complaining. As a result, the target is made to suffer twice—once at the hands of the bully and once at the hands of management.
- ✓ Management may mistakenly believe that the problems will go away if the bully's behaviour is ignored—if this is the response, the bully goes unpunished and is likely to escalate his or her aggressive behaviors since there is no logical reason to cease and desist.

- ✓ Managers will often emphasize teamwork and ignore individual effort. This strategy makes it easy for the bully to accuse the target of "not being a team player."
- ✓ Believing the group means taking the word of multiple employees over that of the target. With this response, the assumption is that the majority is always right; however, the group may be lying about the target or acting out of fear or ignorance. The manager may take this approach because it is easier to discipline one employee than to take a stand against multiple employees.
- ✓ Stereotyping often skews management's judgment, and prejudices are prevalent in the workplace despite corporate policies to the contrary. Less overt forms of discrimination are often practiced based on common stereotypes (e.g., women are weaker, men are tougher, etc.).

**Strategies for Eliminating Bully Behaviors**

Because bullies often hide their actions and are quite skilled at appearing to be helpful and cooperative while at the same time undermining their target, organizations must establish processes and procedures to identify and deal with their actions. An "accidental" bully—one who does not maliciously intend any harm by his or her actions—will quickly apologize and never repeat the mistake (Namie & Namie, 2000). Conversely, an intentional bully will deny that the behavior is occurring and will continue to repeat it (Davenport, Schwartz & Elliott, 1999).

Because bullies are driven by their own fears and insecurities, they rarely can be "cured," but their behavior can be controlled or eliminated. Doing so requires an organization to start at the top, because it is the head of any organization that sets the tone for whether bullying behavior will be

accepted (Davenport, Schwartz & Elliott). Leaders who ignore or otherwise allow these destructive behavior patterns to occur are seriously impacting the health and future viability of their organizations. They are also setting up their organizations to experience an exodus of talent by the people who have too much self-respect to continue to work in such toxic and counter-productive environment.

**To eliminate bullying, organizations may use the following strategies that can improve the work environment:**

1. Establish of an anti-bullying policy that defines bullying and gives some common sense descriptions of acceptable and unacceptable behaviors at work. The language of the policy should specifically address the right of all employees to work in an environment free from bullying. This will give targeted employees a context and a constructive way to confront the bullying tactics (McCord & Richardson, 2001).

2. Conduct climate surveys of employees in an attempt to uncover bullying behavior (Davenport, Schwartz & Elliott, 1999). These surveys should assess employee satisfaction with the work environment. To ensure honest responses, surveys should be returned by employees to a neutral third party for review, and confidentiality must be guaranteed or else employees will not feel free to express their true feelings.

3. Establish reporting, investigation and mediation processes to handle employee complaints about their supervisor or other co-workers. (McCord & Richardson, 2001). It is critical that these policies and

processes have an anti-retaliation provision to ensure that employees will feel that they can use the processes without fear of reprisal.

4. Conduct widespread employee and manager training to ensure that everyone in the organization is aware of their responsibility to conduct themselves in a professional, civil and businesslike manner (Davenport, Schwartz & Elliott, 1999). The reinforcement at new-hire orientation sessions can go a long way toward enforcing zero tolerance for bullying behavior. Employees should be trained on how to recognize the first signs of the bullying/mobbing process so that they can prevent it or deal with it early if it occurs.

## Conclusions

Bullying behavior in the workplace has significant and far-reaching consequences. The issue should not be addressed simply as a way to avoid lawsuits or bad publicity. Instead, creating a zero-tolerance policy, providing education and training to the workforce and establishing processes to deal with instances of workplace bullying are necessary to build a culture of respect that will allow employees to flourish and innovation to thrive. In addition, existing laws regarding hostile work environment, defamation of character and vicarious liability may need to be altered or expanded to include bullying behavior as a punishable offense (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 1999; Namie & Namie; 2000; Brunner & Costello, 2003). Even one bully in the workplace is one too many.

Footnote

* With credit to Hornstein (1996)

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*Harris v. Forklift Systems, Inc.*, 510 U.S. at 22; see also *Rogers v. EEOC*, 454 F.2d 234 (5th Circuit 1971).

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Web Sites

The Workplace Bullying and Trauma Institute (www.bullyinginstitute.org)

Bully Busters (www.bullybusters.com)

Bully Online (www.bullyonline.org)

Just Dignity (www.justdignity.co.uk)

Bullying and Emotional Intelligence (www.bullyeq.com)

The Work Doctor (http://workdoctor.com)

Wickipedia (www.wickipedia.org)

Workplace Bullying (www.bullying.com.au/workbullying.html)

Workbully Support Group (http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/workbully-suppport)

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