

Bully Bosses Prevalent in U.S. Workplaces

By Bill Leonard, Society for Human Resource Management

Most people believe that a bully is someone you have to deal with when you're a kid. Well, think again.

A study released by the San Francisco-based Employment Law Alliance on March 21, 2007, found that bullying in U.S. workplaces is alive and well. And, in many cases, managers and supervisors are the bullies. According to the survey, nearly 45 percent of the respondents reported that they have worked for an abusive boss.

For the report, the Philadelphia research firm the Reed Group did random telephone surveys of 1,000 U.S. adults and conducted extensive interviews with 534 full- or part time workers. Robert Reed, president of the Reed Group and lead researcher on the project, called the survey results "statistically significant."

"We were very surprised at the number of people who said that they have had or in some cases still have an abusive boss," said Stephen J. Hirschfeld, CEO for the Employment Law Alliance. "We thought the results would show some people worked for abusive bosses; we didn't expect to see that the problem was so pervasive."

The survey focused on abusive behavior by supervisors such as verbal abuse, intimidation and threatening gestures. The study was designed specifically to examine workplace behavior that is not typically regarded as serious enough to warrant special legal protections such as those provided

for racial and religious bias or sexual harassment. Hirschfeld believes the survey may be the first of its type ever conducted.

“There have been other studies of workplace bullying, but most I have seen have been non-scientific or informal Internet-based polls,” he said. “I have not seen many surveys that have specifically addressed the issue of bullying by bosses, and I have not seen any that have been as in-depth or comprehensive as this survey.”

Potential for Legislation

Hirschfeld says the survey points to a growing awareness of the problem and believes employers need to pay close attention and look for ways to remedy the situation. Otherwise, he believes that it could become a hot legislative issue—especially in state legislatures.

“There are proposals in about a dozen states for some form of workplace bullying legislation,” he said. “If you add this to the fact that 64 percent of the respondents to the survey said that employees should have some legal recourse, then this has the potential of becoming a very hot legislative topic.”

Hirschfeld points to a recent anti-bullying law enacted in the Canadian province of Quebec. The law gives workers the right to file suit against their employers and to recover damages for “any vexatious behavior that affects an employee’s dignity or their psychological or physical integrity.”

“I believe that sets the legal bar fairly low and would open a floodgate of litigation if a similar law was enacted in the United States,” said Hirschfeld, who is an employment lawyer with the California-based law firm of Curiale Dellaverson Hirschfeld & Kraemer.

Changing the behavior of workplace bullies could be problematic for employers, Hirschfeld concedes, because workplace bullies can be high performers. Aggressive or "type A" behaviors tend to be rewarded in the workplace, but Hirschfeld contends that employers need to draw the line and make sure aggressive workers don't become abusive managers.

"I ask my clients, 'Would you accept this type of behavior if it was aimed towards a member of your family?' If the answer is no, then I tell them that they should then consider cutting this type of employee loose," Hirschfeld said. "Only an employer in a state of denial would ignore the survey results and not re-examine their HR policies, supervisor-employee relations and management training."