Workplace Bullying

Defined:

- **Workplace bullying** refers to **repeated**, unreasonable actions of individuals (or a group) directed towards an employee (or a group of employees), which is intended to intimidate and creates a risk to the health and safety of the employee(s).

Workplace bullying often involves an abuse or misuse of power. Bullying includes behavior that intimidates, degrades, offends, or humiliates a worker, often in front of others. Bullying behavior creates feelings of defenselessness in the target and undermines an individual's right to dignity at work.

Bullying is different from aggression. Whereas aggression may involve a single act, bullying involves repeated attacks against the target, creating an **on-going pattern** of behavior. "Tough" or "demanding" bosses are not necessarily bullies, as long as their primary motivation is to obtain the best performance by setting high expectations. Many bullying situations involve employees bullying their peers, rather than a supervisor bullying an employee.

One study from the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) found that a quarter of the 516 private and public companies studied reported some occurrence of bullying in the preceding year.

Examples of bullying:

- Unwarranted or invalid criticism.
- Blame without factual justification.
- Being treated differently than the rest of your work group.
- Being sworn at.
- Exclusion or social isolation.
- Being shouted at or being humiliated.
- Being the target of practical jokes.
- Excessive monitoring.

What is a workplace bully?

On its surface, bullying is a simple concept. A strong person acts harshly towards someone weaker, and the bullying is blatant and habitual. It includes browbeating and threatening, verbal abuse and yelling. Everyone recognizes that person as a bully.

Obvious bullies ultimately fail

An obvious bully is noisy, overly aggressive and blatant in his attempts to force others to comply with his will. Resist him and he attacks like an ill-bred pit bull. In some toxic workplaces, he may survive for years, or even become a high-level executive.

But usually he will get himself fired. His nasty over-the-top bullying is just too obvious. This simple, stupid version of bullying is rarely a path to sustained success in the American workplace.

Beware the clever bully
Because of this, a successful workplace bully is usually much cleverer in his tactics. He rarely resembles the stereotype. His methods are very subtle, disguised with all the right behaviors. In that lies his treachery. People respect and trust him, and he quietly betrays their trust whenever necessary to fulfill his ambitions. For him, the ends always justify the means. And if the bully is particularly good at this, no one except his victims sees the betrayals. In some cases, not even the victims realize what has happened.

It gets worse and worse...
To make matters worse, a highly skilled bully usually has the dedication, focus and business acumen to create success, or at least the appearance of success. Then he is honored and promoted, held up as an example of a company-centric leader. He is rewarded while the frustration builds among the targets of his bullying and intimidating, backstabbing and manipulating. For them, life has become an upside-down hell..

Beyond the traditional definition of "bully"
A skilled, clever bully displays an elaborate, complex set of behaviors to exploit people around him. Those who only consider bullying to be blatantly aggressive behavior are missing the point. Any habitual pattern of intentional, socially cruel behavior is bullying, including the subtle tactics of deceit, distortion, misrepresentation and misdirection. When the penalty for resisting someone is destruction of your position and reputation, it’s fair to describe that person as a bully. Using this broad definition, bullying has reached epidemic proportions in the American workplace.

Accidental vs. intentional bullying
Not everyone who displays bullying behaviors can truly be described as a workplace bully. If someone has genuine concern for your well-being, he may be attempting to influence your behavior for your own good. Just because you don’t like his approach doesn’t make him a bully. Or someone may yell at you in frustration. But perhaps he lacks emotional maturity and is overreacting to a stressful situation. An isolated incident doesn’t prove bullying. Good-hearted people often make mistakes.

In contrast, a workplace bully has self-serving goals with a complete lack of respect or caring for others, who he never considers as equals. And among these moral and intellectual inferiors, he feels free to use any means necessary to gain compliance. It is his perpetual intention to dominate those he considers being weak, naive, unaware or otherwise susceptible to his guile.

Bullies, backstabbers and manipulators
Is there someone at your workplace who makes you feel anxious, frustrated or angry? Does that person seem intent on controlling your behavior against your will? Does he belittle, embarrass or even humiliate you? With most people, if you make the effort, you can usually get along. Problems arise and are solved. But what if your boss, or one of your co-workers, resists any attempt to have a normal, mutually respectful working relationship? Maybe he is overly critical or micromanaging. He seems intent on intimidating or controlling you. Or he appears to support you one day, then undermines you the next. You find yourself on an emotional roller-coaster. You feel confused and manipulated. You feel like you are alone in an increasingly painful

struggle against his clever, self-serving, destructive behaviors. Your job has become an ordeal and there seems to be no way out.

If this is your situation, then you are probably dealing with a workplace bully.

Over 30 million bullied
You’re not the only one. Roughly one-fourth of employed Americans have reported bullying at work. That’s over 30 million people. Unfortunately, most targets of bullying lack the knowledge and skills to effectively respond. Either they don’t understand the cause of their problems, or they don’t realize that it’s possible to fight back. That's over 30 million easy targets. No wonder that bullies act with such smug confidence in their ability to dominate others.

There are some very important things they don't tell you on career day. Chief among them is that there is a good chance that at some point during your working adult life you will have an abusive boss — the kind who uses his or her authority to torment subordinates. Bullying bosses scream, often with the goal of humiliating. They write up false evaluations to put good workers' jobs at risk. Some are serial bullies, targeting one worker and, when he or she is gone, moving on to their next victim.

Bosses may abuse because they have impossibly high standards, are insecure or have not been properly socialized. But some simply enjoy it. Recent brain-scan research has shown that bullies are wired differently. When they see a victim in pain, it triggers parts of their brain associated with pleasure.

Worker abuse is a widespread problem — in a 2007 Zogby poll, 37% of American adults said they had been bullied at work — and most of it is perfectly legal. Workers who are abused based on their membership in a protected class — race, nationality or religion, among others — can sue under civil rights laws. But the law generally does not protect against plain old viciousness.

Corporate/Institutional Bullying:

Corporate/institutional bullying occurs when bullying is entrenched in an organization and becomes accepted as part of the workplace culture

Corporate/institutional bullying can manifest itself in different ways:

- Placing unreasonable expectations on employees, where failure to meet those expectations means making life unpleasant (or dismissing) anyone who objects.
- Dismissing employees suffering from stress as “weak” while completely ignoring or denying potential work-related causes of the stress. And/or
- Encouraging employees to fabricate complaints about colleagues with promises of promotion or threats of discipline.

Signs of corporate and institutional bullying include:

- Failure to meet organizational goals.
- Increased frequencies of grievances, resignations, and requests for transfers.
- Increased absence due to sickness. And

- Increased disciplinary actions.

If you are aware of bullying in the workplace and do not take action, then you are accepting a share of the responsibility for any future abuses. This means that witnesmses of bullying behavior should be encouraged to report any such incidences. Individuals are less likely to engage in antisocial behavior when it is understood that the organization does not tolerate such behavior and that the perpetrator is likely to be punished.

Factors that Increase the Risk for Bullying Behavior:

- Significant organizational change (i.e., major internal restructuring, technological change).
- Worker characteristics (e.g., age, gender, parental status, apprentice or trainee).
- Workplace relationships (e.g., inadequate information flow between organizational levels, lack of employee participation in decisions. And
- Work systems (e.g., lack of policies about behavior, high rate and intensity of work, staff shortages, interpersonal conflict, organizational constraints, role ambiguity, and role conflict.

How Bullying Affects People:

Victims of bullying experience significant physical and mental health problems:

- High stress; post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).
- Financial problems due to absence
- Reduced self-esteem.
- Musculoskeletal problems.
- Phobias.
- Sleep disturbances.
- Increased depression/self-blame.
- Digestive problems.

How Bullying Affects Organizations:

Each of the individual consequences listed above can be very costly for the organization. Costs of bullying generally fall into three categories:

- Replacing staff members that leave as a result of being bullied.
- Work effort being displaced as staff cope with bullying incidents (i.e., effort being directed away from work productivity and towards coping).
- Costs associated with investigations of ill treatment and potential legal action.

Bullies do not run good organizations; staff turnover and sick leave will be high while morale and productivity will be low. Stress, depression and physical health problems result in time away from work that is costly in terms of workers' compensation and lost productivity. The health problems experienced by victims of bullying result in a sense of helplessness and negative emotional states among employee(s). Low self-esteem and a negative organizational climate suppress creativity and hamper employees' abilities to respond to difficult situations or challenging goals. The breakdown of trust in a bullying environment may mean that employees

will fail to contribute their best work, do not give extra ideas for improvement, do not provide feedback on failures and may be less honest about performance.

Bullying is Different from Harassment
Harassment is one type of illegal discrimination and is defined as offensive and unwelcome conduct, serious enough to adversely affect the terms and conditions of a person's employment, which occurs because of the person's protected class, and can be imputed to the employer. Protected classes in employment are race/color, creed (religion), national origin, sex, marital status, disability, HIV/AIDS or Hepatitis C status, sexual orientation/gender identity, and honorably discharged veteran and military status.

An example of **harassment** could be when an employee tells racist jokes and refers to a particular co-worker or group of co-workers by using racial slurs, and after a complaint, the employer does nothing to stop the behavior. Another example of **harassment** could be a male manager who makes unwelcome sexual suggestions to a female employee and touches her inappropriately.

Bullying also differs from **retaliation**, which occurs after a person makes a complaint of illegal discrimination, and is then the subject of an adverse employment action or subjected to harassment because he or she made the complaint.

Bullying, on the other hand, is often directed at someone a bully feels threatened by. The target often doesn't even realize when they are being bullied because the behavior is covert, through trivial criticisms and isolating actions that occur behind closed doors. While harassment is illegal; bullying in the workplace is not.

What can be done About Bullying?
Bullying in general is NOT illegal in the U.S. unless it involves harassment based on race/color, creed (religion), national origin, sex, age (40+), disability, HIV/AIDS or Hepatitis C status.

However, here is what you can do about bullying:

Employees:
Regain control by:

- Recognizing that you are being bullied.
- Realizing that you are NOT the source of the problem. And
- Recognizing that bullying is about control, and therefore has nothing to do with your performance.

Take action by:

- Keeping a diary detailing the nature of the bullying (e.g., dates, times, places, what was said or done and who was present). And
- Obtaining copies of harassing / bullying paper trails; hold onto copies of documents that contradict the bully's accusations against you (e.g., time sheets, audit reports, etc.).

Other actions:

- Expect the bully to deny and perhaps misconstrue your accusations; have a witness with you during any meetings with the bully; report the behavior to an appropriate person.

Employers:

- Create a zero tolerance anti-bullying policy. This policy should be part of the wider commitment to a safe and healthful working environment and should involve the appropriate Human Resources representative.
- When witnessed or reported, the bullying behavior should be addressed IMMEDIATELY.
- If bullying is entrenched in the organization, complaints need to be taken seriously and investigated promptly. Reassignment of those involved may be necessary (with an "innocent until proven guilty" approach).
- Structure the work environment to incorporate a sense of autonomy, individual challenge/mastery, and clarity of task expectations for employees – Include employees in decision-making processes.
- Hold awareness campaigns for EVERYONE on what bullying is. Encourage reporting.
- Ensure management has an active part in the staff they supervise, rather than being far removed from them.
- Encourage open door policies.
- Investigate the extent and nature of the problem. Conduct attitude surveys.
- Improve management's ability and sensitivity towards dealing with and responding to conflicts.
- Establish an independent contact for employees (e.g., HR contact). And
- Have a demonstrated commitment "from the top" about what is and is not acceptable behavior.

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