Fighting fraud, waste, and abuse

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Beyond the schoolyard: Workplace bullying

» Bullying is experienced by more than one-third of the US workforce.
» Workplace bullying can take many forms.
» Workplace bullying can seriously impact employees, both mentally and physically.
» Workplace bullying can be bad for business, seriously impacting workplaces.
» Individuals and employers can work to combat and prevent workplace bullying.

Increasingly, the media and politicians have decried the observed progression of bullying in the American workplace. Beginning with California in 2003, 21 states have introduced legislation (the Healthy Workplace bill1) to combat workplace bullying. To date, however, none of these bills have been passed into law, which means that bullying remains legal in all 50 states. The simple fact is that workplace bullying permeates the American workplace and can leave indelible marks on its victims and the workplace. Individuals and employers alike benefit from recognizing, combatting, and preventing workplace bullying.

What is, and what is not, workplace bullying?
Any discussion of combatting and preventing workplace bullying requires recognizing what it is and, equally important, what it is not. Generally, workplace bullying occurs when one individual (or a group of individuals) singles out another employee for unreasonable, embarrassing, or intimidating treatment. A workplace bully can be an individual in a position of authority, but can also be a co-worker (or co-workers).

Specifically, workplace bullying consists of repeated, unreasonable actions that are intended to intimidate, made by an individual or group and directed toward an employee or group, thus creating a risk to the health and safety of the affected employee(s). It often involves an abuse of power through behavior that intimidates, degrades, offends, and/or humiliates, often in front of others.

As many as half of American workers have witnessed workplace bullying:2 Up to 35% of American workers have been targeted by workplace bullying, with only about 20% of workplace bullying crossing the line into harassment.3 Of the bullies, approximately 60% are men, who tend to bully other men and women equally. Female bullies, however, tend to bully other women.4 Workplace bullying takes many forms, including:

» shouting, swearing, or otherwise verbal abuse;
» singling out an individual for unjustified criticism or blame;
» treating an individual differently than work group peers;
» excluding an individual from workplace activities, including social functions;
» excessively monitoring an individual, particularly where there is no work-related purpose for the monitoring;

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ignoring an individual’s work or workplace contributions;

- directing language or actions that embarrass or humiliate another employee; and

- engaging in practical jokes, particularly if repeatedly directed to the same individual.

Of important note to 21st century employers, employment-related bullying today is not limited to the four walls of the workplace. Social media—Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, etc.—all provide real-time virtual vehicles for bullying behaviors and tactics. However, some workplace behavior does not usually rise to the level of bullying, including:

- A manager who shouts at or criticizes all of his/her subordinate employees. He/she may be a bad manager, and the workplace may be unpleasant, but it does not rise to bullying unless the manager unjustifiably singles out one or a few employees for this treatment.

- A co-worker who criticizes everything, always assumes credit for a group’s or others’ successes, passes blame for mistakes, or frequently makes hurtful comments or jokes about others.

- Negative comments or actions based on an individual’s legally protected status (e.g., age, sex, religion, national origin, ethnicity, disability, etc.). Such behavior crosses the line into harassment which, unlike bullying, is prohibited by various federal, state, and local laws that provide a victim with administrative and judicial means to combat the behavior.

Workplace bullying can seriously impact employers

Regardless of its source or the behavior itself, workplace bullying can seriously and negatively impact employees, manifesting itself physically within victims as:

- Stress
- Absenteeism
- Increased use of sick leave
- Low productivity
- Lowered self-esteem and depression
- Anxiety
- Increased use of medications such as antidepressants, sleeping pills, and tranquilizers
- Increased fatigue
- Digestive issues
- High blood pressure
- Insomnia
- Trouble with interpersonal relationships resulting from workplace stress and anxiety
- Post-traumatic stress disorder

Workplace bullying can seriously impact employers

Workplace bullying can also be bad for business. Examples of how employers can also be victimized by workplace bullying include:

- Increased and/or high employee turnover, requiring employers to invest in hiring and training new employees only to lose them prematurely and, possibly, to a competitor.

- Reduced and/or low productivity resulting when employees are not motivated to perform at their highest level and more often miss working time due to stress-related illnesses.

- Lost innovations. Bullies tend to be more interested in advancing their own careers by attacking their victims, rather than advancing the employer’s interests, and victims are less likely to generate or share new ideas.

- Increased difficulty recruiting or otherwise attracting qualified individuals as potential employees as word spreads the employer’s working environment is rife with bullies.

What can individuals do to combat workplace bullying?

Foremost, individuals who are being subjected to workplace bullying should (1) recognize
they are being subjected to bullying and (2) realize they are not at fault. If they are experiencing resulting adverse physical impacts, they should consult their physician or other healthcare provider or counselor.

Victims of bullying should never attempt to resolve the issue on their own. More often than not, the bully will perceive the victim’s attempts to mitigate the situation as weakness and feel emboldened to continue or even escalate the bullying behavior.

Rather, bullying victims should keep a diary of the nature of the bullying, focusing on objective facts, similar to a news reporter reporting the day’s news. As any journalism student would recite, the victim should journal the “5 Ws and 1 H”: who, what, when, where, why, and how. Further, the individual should obtain copies of any relevant paper trails and keep copies of any documents that contradict a bully’s unjustified accusations. The individual should expect the bully to deny and attempt to misconstrue any accusations of misconduct, and be prepared.

Tantamount to combatting a workplace bully, ultimately, is following the employer’s procedures for reporting workplace-related issues and reporting a bully’s improper behavior to the appropriate person(s) within the employer (usually in Human Resources or upper management) for investigation and corrective action. If the employer does not know the bullying is occurring, the employer cannot act to stop it. As soon as practicable, an individual should report the bully’s improper behavior, relying on his/her own documentation to support the complaint of improper targeting by a workplace bully or bullies.

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What can employers do to combat and prevent workplace bullying?

Workplace bullying can be devastating to employees and, consequently, employers. Proactive employers who seek to prohibit workplace bullying will demonstrate a top-down commitment about what behavior will, and will not be, acceptable in the workplace. They will develop, adopt, and implement zero-tolerance policies that prohibit workplace bullying and provide victims with an effective mechanism for reporting violations. For example, an employee who feels bullied by his/her supervisor should not be required to follow the “chain of command” and first file a complaint with that supervisor about a violation of the employer’s anti-workplace bullying policy. Effective policies provide alternate routes of complaint, such as to either the HR department or a member of upper management.

Employers should encourage open-door policies among management and employees, and further conduct workplace bullying awareness campaigns. Effective campaigns include periodic meetings to inform and remind employees what workplace bullying is, the employer’s policy prohibiting such behavior, how to report violations of this policy, and the potential consequences awaiting workplace bullies—including termination for misconduct. Employers should further train managers regarding workplace bullying, so they possess a basic understanding of the warning signs of bullying, and the potential negative impacts for not addressing workplace bullying in a timely way.

When an employer receives a report of workplace bullying, it should take that complaint seriously and investigate it promptly. Sometimes,
it may be necessary to reassign the alleged bully while the investigation is ongoing, in order to limit contact between the individuals involved. Importantly, the employer should prohibit any retaliation against an individual for even reporting a violation, with consequences similar to actual violations of the policy for anyone who engages in such prohibited retaliation. Where an employer’s investigation confirms a violation, the employer should take all reasonable steps necessary to ensure the improper behavior stops and does not recur, which may very well include terminating the workplace bully.

Unfortunately, in some workplaces there is a corporate culture that promotes workplace bullying behavior. Most often, employers will not openly and purposefully support bullying tactics. However, through inattention, inaction, insufficient action, or the development of the practice of placing blame and finding fault rather than engaging employees to solve problems, these employers may find their workplaces riddled with bullies. In some circumstances, individuals who report bullying behavior may only find the problem worsening. Then, the employee faces a Hobson’s Choice: either make the best of the situation or seek out other employment.

1. For updates on legislation, see www.healthyworkplacebill.org