

Putting a STOP to Workplace Bullying

By Catherine Mattice

The media has been all a-frenzy over the issue of bullying in schools lately; but bullying doesn't end when you graduate from high school. Bullying, unfortunately, is also alive and well in the workplace. What exactly is *workplace* bullying? And what do employees, supervisors, and managers need to know about this troublesome behavior? Read on!

Bullying Concepts

There are three concepts central to workplace bullying:

❖ **Workplace bullying is repeated and ongoing** – Generally when a person gets frustrated and yells at someone else on one occasion – that is not bullying. Bullying behaviors are *ongoing*, and over time become more *frequent* and *aggressive*. Researchers say that a bullying incident must occur at least once a week for a period of six months for the aggressive behavior to be considered bullying.

❖ **Workplace bullying causes harm** – Bullying causes psychological and physical harm to targets and witnesses. They both experience anxiety, depression, anger, discouragement, and even post-traumatic stress disorder. This causes lack of sleep, stomachaches, and other health problems.

❖ **Workplace bullying creates an unfair match** – Bullying begins with an initial bullying incident where a bully is aggressive towards a target. If the target does not immediately stand up in that instant, the bully will begin to believe that the target will never stand up and will “allow” the behavior to happen. Then in the second aggressive incident, if the target doesn't immediately stand up the bully's ideas will be confirmed. With each

incident, the bullying becomes more aggressive, and eventually an unfair match ensues. The bully believes he or she has control over the target, and the target believes the same.

What behaviors “count” as bullying?

Bullying is all about perception. Two people could be treated exactly the same way by a boss, and one might consider the boss's behavior bullying while the other wouldn't be all that bothered. To that end, it is important for each person to think about what bullying means to him or her. That being said, I often break bullying behaviors into three categories and have provided a few examples of behaviors under each:

❖ **Aggressive communication** – Insulting, shouting or yelling, angry outbursts, getting in someone's personal space, aggressive body language, and harshly written emails;

❖ **Acts focused on humiliation** – Teasing, gossiping, spreading untrue rumors, playing harsh practical jokes, and posting nasty comments on a person's social network page; and

❖ **Manipulation of work** – Giving workloads and deadlines that are impossible to meet, changing tasks without any rhyme or reason, removing tasks imperative to a person's job (leaving them feeling useless), using employee evaluations to document supposed decrease in work quality, and not providing employees information they need to do their job.

Manipulation of work is the most common form of bullying because it is easy to get away with.

Bullying is Costly for the Organization

There are a variety of factors that translate into the impact of bullying on an organization's bottom line. Here are just a few:

❖ **Communication breakdown** – Bullies often use communication as a means to bully.



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As a result, bullies do things like leave their targets out of staff meetings they should be attending or off of email chains they should be a part of. Second, targets aren't likely going to ask a question if the person with the answer is bullying them. Either way, targets are left without all of the information they need to do their job right and this renders them unable to meet organizational goals.

❖ **Absenteeism, presenteeism, low quality of work** – This means, plain and simple, that people can't get quality work done when they are being bullied at work. In fact, targets take, on average, a full week more sick leave than employees who are *not* targets of bullying. In addition, when people are mistreated at work they spend a lot of time thinking about the mistreatment and avoiding the abuser.

❖ **Customer dissatisfaction and lost customers** – Customers are the reason that businesses thrive; so it is really sad when businesses lose customers due to a bullying employee. And yet, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) found that 11% of bullying incidents were committed against customers – and with the availability of blogs and social networks, those unhappy customers are telling millions of other potential customers.

Creating a Positive Workplace

Employee assistance professionals can play a key role in helping prevent bullying and create a positive workplace. In reality, for bullying to end, *everyone* in the organization has to make a commitment to treating each other with respect. That means everyone should focus on demonstrating effective communication skills, such as those laid out below:

❖ **Engage in active listening** – Listening and hearing are really two different things. Hearing is a passive reception of sound, while listening is an active process that involves processing the information and responding positively to the speaker. Active listeners will nod their heads or

say, “uh uh” to show that they are listening, and paraphrase to ensure they understood the right message. On average we only listen 14% of the time. Why? Our own preconceived notions get in the way. When we stereotype people, make incorrect assumptions about them, or have a personal bias against them, for example, we certainly won't be able to listen to them. How can we be better listeners? Think of listening as an active, rather than passive, process. Resist and remove distractions, suspend judgment, avoid letting assumptions get in the way, and talk less so you can listen MORE.

❖ **Use positive language** – There are two types of messages: disconfirming and confirming. Disconfirming messages include interrupting or ignoring others, shifting topics, avoiding the topic altogether, or being aggressive. Being judgmental, asserting control or superiority over others, and being manipulative or stubborn are generally considered aggressive types of messages. On the other hand, confirming messages offer recognition and acknowledge interest in other people's ideas. Confirming messages are descriptive, empathetic, impartial, and assertive. This is known as positive language.

❖ **Practice the art of assertiveness** – In positive workplace cultures everyone should feel free to speak up when they have an idea or problem, or when they feel like another person is being uncivil or bullying them. Assertiveness means you have the ability to clearly and non-judgmentally state what you feel, need or want without hurting other people's feelings. It includes three steps:

1. Validate the other person's point of view.
2. State why that will not work for you, or what the problem is.
3. State what you want, and offer a solution.

For example, you might say something like this to a co-worker: “John, I understand that you are getting frustrated with me because you think I've made a few mistakes (validation). But the way you're speaking to me right now is unprofessional and even aggressive (problem). In the future, I expect to be treated with respect; we are co-workers and have to work together (solution).”

Stand Up For Each Other

Finally, everyone must agree to stand up for each other when they witness one person bullying someone. If we hold each other accountable for demonstrating respectful and civil behavior at all times, everyone will be happier and healthier and the organization will thrive.

Activity: Developing ground rules

Discuss as a group what behaviors are acceptable, positive, and healthy. Then discuss what behaviors should be prohibited. The two lists can be added into a healthy workplace corporate policy or even turned into a corporate values system. The behaviors can also be tied to performance management programs. In other words, employees could be rewarded for engaging in the positive behaviors, and disciplined for engaging in prohibited ones.

For Supervisors & Managers:

Your Role in Ending Bullying in the Workplace

Supervisors, managers, and other decision-makers are ultimately responsible for eradicating bullying and replacing a negative culture with a positive and healthy one. If employees can learn to treat each other with respect, the leaders of the organization must hold everyone accountable to maintaining a culture of civility.

❖ *Set an example* – You cannot be a successful manager if people are afraid of you, and you can't hold them responsible for respectful workplace behavior if you're not practicing it yourself. Remember that, as a manager or supervisor, your choice of words, tone of voice, and body language is an important asset to building a respectful workplace.

❖ *Detect bullies* – One way to detect bullying or other negative behaviors is through observation. Be aware of the climate within your own department at all times, and when someone steps out of line say something to them

immediately. Other, more quantitative ways to detect bullying include exit interviews, 360-degree reviews, climate surveys, and communication audits.

❖ *Handle complaints* – Whether your corporate policy handbook has a policy against bullying or not, grievances about bullying should be taken seriously and treated just like complaints of sexual harassment. In fact, some research has indicated that bullying is more detrimental to a person than sexual harassment because it is often allowed to go on for much longer periods of time. That's because complaints of bullying are often ignored. When you hear a complaint about bullying, follow the same procedures you would if the complaint was about sexual harassment. That means conduct an investigation, document your findings, and make a formal decision.

❖ *Ignite cultural change* – The culture of an entire organization is the responsibility of the leaders at the top. In order for organizational culture change to occur, the leaders have to get on board and set the change in motion. However, even if your leaders aren't on board with a major cultural overhaul, supervisors and managers can create and manage a positive culture within their own departments.

To do that, meet with staff members and discuss the department culture. What would they like it to be? From there, develop action items and attach benchmarks to track success. Action items might include: developing a process for saying thank you to each other, holding monthly social gatherings, or developing a video that outlines the department's positive cultural values. Be creative – the options are endless.

If even just one department starts focusing on positivity – others will more than likely follow suit.

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More Tips on Ending Bullying



For managers:

❖ *Establish performance management training* – A policy in and of itself is not the linchpin for a respectful workplace – civility is. Civility only becomes part of the culture through action plans, on both interpersonal and departmental levels. Training must center on the new policy, and rewards must be given to those who demonstrate competence and empathy (even if the reward is simply public praise, which still demonstrates that leaders are paying attention to interpersonal relationships).

These are all aspects of performance management training. Performance management, essentially, is the process of ensuring employees are meeting goals and behaving in ways that are conducive to making the organization successful. An organization is only as strong as its employees, so improving the performance of people increases the effectiveness of an organization. As managers and supervisors, you are probably already engaging in performance management by ensuring people are meeting their workload quota. But you

also have the ability to ensure your employees are meeting interpersonal performance goals too.

In order to do so, each employee should be clear on what types of behaviors they are required to display, and when employees actually engage in those behaviors they should be rewarded. Ultimately, adding civil behaviors to a performance management program provides an incentive to treat each other with respect.

For managers and employees:

❖ *Offer coaching to handle complaints* – Even when a policy emphasizing collaborative, civil, and respectful behavior is in place, complaints must still be addressed. They should be handled much like those about sexual harassment, including an investigation, documentation, and possible disciplinary actions. Even without a formal complaint filed, coaching those perceived to be assertive is paramount to maintaining a healthy workplace. In addition, targets often need counseling and sometimes communication skills coaching that teach assertiveness. The EA professional can play a vital role in providing this service.

For employees:

❖ *Targets are often not aware of what to call the aggressive behaviors they experience at work* – They just know they are uncomfortable, anxious, sad, and feel helpless. If what EA professionals hear sounds like bullying, they need help to find the words to describe it. They are in pain, and until more organizations are willing to acknowledge that bullying is real, they are alone.

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