

Nipping Workplace Bullying in the Bud

By BNET Editorial

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Bullying is a major problem in workplaces all over the world. A recent study estimated that approximately one in six U.S. workers had directly experienced bullying within the previous year.

Although there is no legal definition of bullying, it is generally defined as “repeated, mistreatment of one or more persons by one or more other persons that has a detrimental effect on the victim or victims.”

Bullying campaigns can start suddenly, for no apparent reason, and continue unnoticed—or, worse, be tolerated—by employers. Some campaigns are conducted with such spite and persistence that, ultimately, the victims leave their jobs.

If employees believe that their employer has failed to take appropriate action, they may feel they have no choice but to leave. A number of U.S. states are considering legislation prohibiting bullying in the workplace. However, under current federal and state laws, employees who are bullied have no legal recourse against bullying unless they can claim discrimination based on race, gender, age, or disability.

As an employer you need to realize that your business, too, is a victim of the bully. Bullying costs companies in increased sick time, lost productivity, and employee turnover. It is therefore essential for business owners, and all staff who supervise or manage others, to be aware both of the warning signs of bullying and of the practical steps they can take to deal with problems before they develop into a sustained campaign.

An explanation of the key steps for quickly and decisively tackling instances of bullying, and guidance for creating a culture that will not tolerate bullying follow.

What You Need to Know

Why do people bully others?

There is no one reason why one co-worker begins to bully another. Triggers can include any of the following:

- a feeling of incompetence in handling his or her own job
- a feeling of having missed out on a promotion
- a feeling that a highly competent and popular colleague might be a threat to his or her position
- a personality clash with a colleague
- personal problems at home that make the individual feel insecure and inadequate

Employers must be on the lookout for warning signs, and must take appropriate and immediate action when a potential problem is detected.

What can I, as an employer, do to prevent bullying in the first place?

It is important that you have policies and procedures to prevent bullying and to deal with it should it arise. Make sure your employees are aware of the policies and understand that they will be enforced.

Develop your policies and procedures with input from everyone, from senior managers to new recruits, and include the following:

- a clear statement explaining that bullying will not be tolerated and may be treated as a disciplinary offense
- specific examples of unacceptable behavior so that employees are clear about what will not be tolerated
- an outline of the responsibilities of supervisors and managers to prevent bullying
- practical steps for anyone who is concerned about bullying, or who is being bullied, to take to gather evidence of the problem
- details of how complaints will be handled and of the process that will follow
- assurance that anyone who assists in the investigation of a bullying offense will be protected from retaliation
- reference to disciplinary procedures
- the name of a manager or other staff member appointed to deal with instances of bullying—this can be useful for those who are being bullied by their own manager, as such victims may feel that they have nobody to turn to
- details of how the policy will be implemented, reviewed, and monitored

It is also important to emphasize that any information you receive related to bullying will be treated in confidence. You need to encourage employees to report their concerns without feeling that they are “tattling.”

What to Do

Know the Warning Signs

Bullying can take many forms. It might be verbal abuse; threatening, humiliating, or offensive behavior; or interference with the victim’s work, and might include any of the following:

- spreading malicious rumors
- ridiculing or demeaning someone
- excluding people
- micromanaging or overbearing supervision
- unwelcome sexual advances
- making threats
- persistent criticism
- withholding information
- removing responsibilities
- overloading with work

These forms of bullying are often carried out by people in supervisory or lower management roles, which can make bullying even more difficult for you, the employer, to detect. Senior managers and business owners can easily become removed from the daily office banter and, therefore, miss situations where cruel joking or exclusion could occur. Additionally, those in lower management are in positions of trust, and the idea that they might abuse that position can be unwelcome. It is difficult for a senior manager to examine the situation without being guilty of micromanagement him- or herself.

For all these reasons, it is important that you create a culture that will not tolerate bullying, as well as develop a formal policy that employees can turn to if they are concerned about any inappropriate behavior.

Identify Potential Bullies

A potential bully may appear perfectly “normal,” but certain personality traits may indicate a potential tendency to bully others. Among the warning signs are:

- changeable personality—someone who can be viciously outspoken in private conversations or on social occasions, but who is always innocent and charming in front of senior colleagues;
- someone who is excessively charming, complimentary and superficial when in front of an “audience”;
- someone who holds prejudicial views and makes regular, inappropriate jokes about issues relating to sex, disability, or race;
- someone (often a manager) who is very controlling of his or her team, displays “perfectionist” tendencies, and is quick to criticize others rather than acknowledging or praising their efforts;
- someone (often a manager) who is impatient and irritable when called upon to deal with personal issues or concerns of a team member;
- someone who, when called to account for an error, missed deadline, mistake or failing, immediately counter-attacks with lies and fabricated criticisms and allegations. Bullies often

respond to criticism by appearing very distressed and claiming to be victims themselves, in order to avoid accountability for their actions.

Develop a Procedure for Tackling Bullying

When You First Hear Of a Situation

It is crucial that you react to bullying swiftly and decisively. The most important actions to take when approached by an employee concerned about bullying, or claiming to have been bullied, are as follows:

- Respond to concerns sensitively, and never refuse to accept that a “star” employee might be a bully.
- Deal with any complaints quickly. Bullying campaigns are persistent and intensive and, if left unchecked, can escalate into a serious incident.
- Ensure that complaints are dealt with in complete confidence. Employees must be able to share their concerns with you without feeling that their careers might be affected.
- Advise the complaining party to gather as much evidence as possible, by keeping a diary of any relevant dates and times, and by retaining any related notes, memos, or e-mails.

As a first step, it may be worth trying to solve the problem informally by discussing the complaint separately with both parties. Someone accused of bullying may be genuinely unaware that their behavior is inappropriate, and a simple—but unambiguous—conversation may be sufficient to point out the problems.

The Formal Complaint

The next stage is a formal complaint:

- The employee formally reports the bullying to his or her supervisor or another designated person.
- An impartial staff member investigates the complaint thoroughly and objectively. Both parties are interviewed separately, to get both sides of the story.
- The alleged bully may need to be suspended with pay while investigations take place.
- The complainant should be provided with a detailed written response explaining the outcome of the investigation and the action to be taken.
- If the complaint is upheld, the bullying should be dealt with promptly.
- Both the complainant and the alleged bully should have an opportunity to appeal, if necessary, within given time limits.

Throughout this process, both the victim and the alleged bully should be given the right to be accompanied by a friend or colleague during any meetings.

Taking Action

Examples of possible penalties or actions you might decide to take against the bully include:

- counseling
- a written warning
- suspension
- transfer to another department or location
- dismissal

Victims of bullying may also be offered counseling. Being bullied can be extremely traumatic. If it continues for a long period of time, it can affect the mental and physical health of the victim quite dramatically—some people even feel suicidal as a result of it. Counseling could be provided by internal human resources staff who have been specially trained to deal with bullying in the workplace, or by an outside expert brought into the organization.

What to Avoid

You don't take it seriously enough

Bullying is often related to personal issues, and many employers feel uncomfortable dealing with, or even discussing the problem. You may be tempted to take the informal approach of holding a private meeting with the bully and the victim, explaining that you will not tolerate what is going on, and then walk away, believing the issue has been settled. However, experienced or particularly clever bullies will often continue their campaigns while being superficially pleasant to both you and the victim.

This becomes a difficult situation to revisit for a number of reasons:

- Victims may feel particularly afraid of the consequences of reporting the bullying a second time.
- They may also think that they are being a “nuisance” by bothering you with an incident they feel ashamed that they have been unable to resolve for themselves.
- If the bully is being superficially affable and charming, the continuation of the campaign can be difficult to prove.

You fail to realize that bullying is taking place

If you manage a team, you need to be aware of how your employees are feeling at all times. Look for signs of stress such as tiredness and lack of confidence. Talk to employees regularly to make sure that they are happy in the workplace, and encourage them to be open with you. This will help them to be comfortable about reporting any problems that may arise. Also look for regular absences, as this

could be a sign that an employee is avoiding coming to work. You may even spot a pattern; if one part of your company experiences a lot of sickness or a high turnover of staff, a bully could be the cause.

You don't believe the victim

If a person accused of bullying has always been a model employee, you may not be able to imagine their being engaged in a sustained bullying campaign. However, you must take appropriate action immediately by following the procedures outlined in your anti-bullying policy.

Where to Learn More

Book:

Namie, Gary, and Ruth Namie, *The Bully at Work: What You Can Do to Stop the Hurt and Reclaim Your Dignity on the Job*. Naperville, Ill: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2003

Web Sites:

Workplace Bullying Institute: www.bullyinginstitute.org

Bully Busters: <http://bullybusters.org>

monster.com: <http://content.monster.com/articles/3493/18150/1/default.aspx>