

CREATING A WORLD WITHOUT BULLYING



Edited by Debra Pepler, Joanne Cummings & Wendy Craig

CHAPTER 11: Bullying in the Workplace: The Case for Early Recognition and Intervention

Marilyn Noble¹, Wendy Josephson², Brenden Sommerhalder³, and Lesley Sellwood²
Muriel McQueen Fergusson Centre for Family Violence Research, University of New
Brunswick¹
University of Winnipeg²
Saint Mary's University³

WORKPLACE BULLYING: WHAT IS IT?

Anyone who has been stung by mean-spirited or demeaning behaviour at work can tell you that the wounds inflicted, while often invisible, are very real. But finding the right words to describe adequately what has happened can be a much more complicated matter. There is considerable discussion among researchers regarding what terminology best describes a phenomenon that encompasses such a wide range of inappropriate behaviours (Fox & Spector, 2005), from incivility and rudeness to violence and abuse. A pivotal point in this debate is whether to focus on the problem state (workplace bullying, harassment, intimidation, abuse, etc.) or on the desired solution state (a safe, respectful, and inclusive workplace and workplace civility and decency; e.g., Westhues, 2007a, 2007b). This tension can be kept in balance by bearing in mind that these are, in essence, two sides of the same coin.

Drawing the Boundaries: Distinguishing Among Bullying, Conflict, and the Right to Manage

Next, where do we draw the line? What is acceptable behaviour, and what is not? It is one thing for an organization to delineate in general terms the types of behaviours that are unacceptable, and quite another to help individuals determine at what precise point behaviour has actually crossed the oft-cited line of "what was known or ought reasonably to have been known" to be unwanted or unwelcome behaviour. How do we delineate bullying from conflict or from the right to manage? Conflict will arise from time to time, and there's nothing inherently negative about holding differing points of view. Colleagues have the right to disagree, and managers have the right to manage, but no one has the right to abuse others. The point of contention often lies less in *what* was done than in *how* it was done (e.g., Braverman, 2002). On the other hand, bullying, harassment, abuse, and discrimination – all forms of disrespect – hinge on power differences. Some people's power is conferred by their job title and their position within the professional or administrative hierarchy. Some people gain power in cliques and factions; others gain power through having very forceful personalities or access to privileged information. Still others may be tempted to misuse "influence power", through their access to the "inner circle".

Behaviour, Intent, and Impact

Most workplaces define the offending conduct in terms of (a) concrete actions and (b) their underlying intent. This presupposes (a) that everyone in the workplace has the same sensitivity threshold, and (b) that perpetrators are aware of how their behaviour is perceived by others. Therein lies the problem, as researchers at the University of New Brunswick have discovered, from interviewing employees in a variety of workplaces (MacIntosh, 2005a, 2005b, 2006, 2008; Noble, 2007, 2009; University of New Brunswick Research Team on Workplace Violence and Abuse, n.d.).

First, let's recognize that the workplace is not a level playing field. People have unequal power and unequal status, and come from different backgrounds, carrying their own cultural norms, values, beliefs, expectations, and prior experiences. For instance, what offends someone from a minority culture might not cause the slightest ripple for someone from the mainstream (or vice versa). Gender, sexual orientation, age and generational cohort, educational level, socio-economic status, and physical and mental health status are just a few of the elements that can give rise to both perceived and actual inequality in the workplace.

Second, it's helpful to consider how most of us learn to self-correct. If our behaviour is out of line and someone points that out to us, then we have an opportunity to revisit how we are treating others and to mend our ways. But if no one tells us, then we may very well continue to behave as we have in the past, without realizing that what we are doing is objectionable to others. And therein lies the rub: Those who bully others aren't people who invite this kind of feedback, or to whom it is readily offered. People who bully or harass would seldom label their own behaviour that way. Many of them have no idea how their conduct impacts others, and they have all sorts of justifications for behaving as they do. Parkins, Fishbein and Ritchey (2006) have found that those who bully others at work have an especially hard time seeing things from the perspective of others, and little concern for what others think of them.

To clarify this point, let's look at it in context. Not wanting to make waves, a person on the receiving end of inappropriate conduct may choose to ignore it for months, and so it continues. But one day, she reaches the limit of her patience, and hits the roof. The aggressor gapes at her, dumbstruck, and calls her behaviour an extreme overreaction to a minor incident. From her perspective, however, she has shown remarkable restraint, and has been much too patient for much too long. When the organization's focus is placed solely on the offending behaviour and the person who commits it, this tends to overlook or minimize the impact of the interaction on its recipient, and on the bystanders, as well. Viewed through the recipient's lens, workplace bullying can be summarized as *personal diminishment* – behaviour that leads someone to feel incompetent, ashamed, invisible, discounted, worthless, unwanted, unwelcome, or unsafe.

The Importance of Naming It

Lacking a label for what is taking place sometimes leads people to tolerate inappropriate conduct and to internalize the blame, if the inappropriate conduct is directed at them. Naming it helps them to see this as a distinctive pattern with a structure and dynamic of its own. Labelling is often a crucial step in examining the experience more objectively, and viewing it as a systemic problem rather than writing it off as a personality conflict.

A Working Definition

Workplace bullying is aggression between parties of unequal power, which, when repeated over time, humiliates, demoralizes, or terrorizes an employee or group of employees, undermines their credibility and effectiveness, and contributes to a disrespectful or hostile work environment. It includes both intentionally and unwittingly offensive words, gestures, images, actions, and failure to act. Workplace bullying may be *physical*, including such things as physical assaults, damaging a person's property, or sabotaging equipment to cause injury to someone. Bullying may also be *psychological*, such as threatening and other forms of intimidation, or humiliation through teasing and name calling. *Social* bullying includes ganging up in cliques and factions to isolate or exclude someone, gossiping about them, spreading rumours, setting them up to look foolish or incompetent in front of others, and damaging their friendships. Sometimes bullying takes the form of a personal attack, and sometimes it is work-related (Aquino & Thau, 2009).

Further, within any of these categories, bullying may be *sexual* and it may be *discriminatory*. Physical bullying may take the form of sexual assault, psychological bullying may include sexual harassment, racist or homophobic remarks, or disparaging someone because of a disability, and social bullying may exclude or undermine someone because of their gender, race, or sexual orientation. Clearly, bullying in the workplace can be a violation of criminal and human rights legislation, and therefore subject to strong penalties on those grounds. Perhaps to avoid such sanctions, bullying is often done covertly, indirectly, and passively. In fact, direct physical aggression is the rarest form of bullying across all countries in which it has been studied. The most common kinds of bullying behaviours are covert, passive, nonverbal, and directed against an individual's work-related achievement, such as systematically leaving someone out of the loop on information that is critical to job success (Rayner & Cooper, 2006).

Typically, Who is Involved?

As the University of New Brunswick research team describes it, workplace bullying can occur in a variety of configurations, each of which plays out in distinctive ways:

One person bullying another: In this instance, one person may have singled out one other individual, or may be bullying several people at once or in succession, in isolation from one another. When this behaviour is directed at several individuals, concurrently or over time, it is considered to be *serial* bullying.

One person bullying a group: When this happens, those on the receiving end are aware that others are being treated in a similar way, and the potential exists for them to provide support to one another and even to strategize collectively about how to deal with the bullying.

A group bullying an individual: When a group bullies an individual employee or smaller group, it is known as *mobbing*. This is a very isolating experience and frequently undermines the self-confidence of those on the receiving end. A person being mobbed typically feels that there is no safe place within the work setting to turn for support.

A toxic workplace/poisoned work environment: In a toxic workplace or poisoned work environment, the standards for behaviour have sunk to such a level that virtually no one experiences emotional safety, and many dread going to work.

Who Perpetrates It?

Both men and women can be involved in bullying others and being bullied (Hoel & Cooper, 2000; Hoel, Faragher, & Cooper 2001; Hoel, 2003). There is a common tendency to assume that bullying originates with supervisors or managers, but this is not always the case (Rayner, Hoel, & Cooper, 2002). Peers and subordinates can also bully, and sometimes the organization's clients, subcontractors, board members, the public, or the media engage in bullying. It is also possible for the organization itself to become the bully; this is particularly true when the bottom line becomes the only thing that matters, and staff are treated without due respect, simply as means to an end. If supervisors and managers are promoted on the basis of their subordinates' productivity but nothing is done to monitor how that productivity is achieved, then the organization may in fact be rewarding bullying behaviour (e.g., Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2005).

Who is Bullied in the Workplace?

In essence, anyone can be bullied. Newcomers to the organization may be particularly vulnerable. The same may be true of those who are in some way different, for instance individuals who are minorities within that particular organizational setting. But sometimes people who are well-liked, competent, and very ethical may be negatively singled out by others who view them as a threat (Rayner et al., 2002).

Who Sees it Happen?

There are usually many people who are not directly involved in bullying but who see or hear what is going on. They are referred to as bystanders. The Norwegian researcher, Dan Olweus (1993) identified a range of distinct types of bystander behaviours and roles which he placed on a continuum. Olweus's typology has been carefully validated, and has become the basis for much of the bullying reduction work that seeks to empower bystanders to become part of the solution. In work being done at the University of New Brunswick, it provided a useful description for research on workplace bullying, even though the typology had originated with Olweus's research on children's bullying. Olweus's descriptions are paraphrased here in common parlance: First there are the *henchmen*, who help the principal actor to carry out the bullying. Being a henchman is often about protecting oneself from being bullied. Next there are those in the *cheering section*, who view the bullying as a form of live entertainment. Then there are the *deer caught in the headlights*, who are very uncomfortable with what is going on, but who feel powerless to act, are unaware of how they could help, and/or fearful that if they take some form of action, they will be bullied themselves. The *witnesses* will report the problem to someone in authority and insist that action be taken. Finally, the *defenders* will step up beside the person being bullied and say, "I'm here if you need me", thereby letting that individual know that he/she is not alone and that what is happening is unacceptable; at the same time, the defenders are indirectly putting the person committing the bullying on notice that their behaviour is out of line.

PREVALENCE OF WORKPLACE BULLYING

At this time there is a dearth of quantitative studies of workplace bullying in Canada based on representative national samples. A provincially representative sample of Ontario teachers and support staff reported a rate of 51% experiencing workplace bullying over the course of their careers (Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, 2005). McKay, Arnold, Fratzl, and Thomas (2008) found a similar rate of 53% in the previous five years among academic staff and librarians at the Canadian university at which they conducted their study. Lee and Brotheridge (2006) surveyed workers in the prairie region of Canada, and reported a rate of 40% in the previous six months.

The rates reported in Canada are quite high, by international standards. For example, Keashly, and Jagatic (2003) reported rates around 20% for a representative sample of workers in one US state (Michigan). In research from the United Kingdom and Australia, rates are usually in the range of 10 to 20% (Rayner & Cooper, 2006), and a review of studies from ten European countries (Zapf, Einarsen, Hoel, & Vartia, 2003) yielded a prevalence estimate of 8 to 10%. The difference in prevalence rates is due at least in part to differences in definitions used by researchers in different parts of the world. European researchers tend to count bullying events over a relatively short period of time (usually 6 months) and use a very stringent definition (e.g., often, the behaviour must occur at least weekly, persist for at least 6 months, and be labeled as bullying by its recipient to be counted).

These definitional differences can have a strong impact on the prevalence rates reported. Rayner and Cooper (2006) found that rates doubled in the British and Australian samples if participants were asked about behaviour that met the definition of bullying but the word "bullying" was not actually used. Rayner (1997) found a rate of 53% for the past 6 months in a sample of British students who were employed, allowing participants to use their own definition of bullying. Some of the national differences in reported prevalence rates do appear to reflect true national differences in the extent of workplace bullying. Comparing only studies that used the same time period for counting and a comparable definition, Rayner and Cooper (2006) found British and Australian workers are still about twice as likely to report being bullied as their Scandinavian counterparts.

To the extent that workplace bullying prevalence has been measured in Canada, it appears to be even more of a problem than in many other parts of the world. In workplaces where it occurs, it has the potential to affect a significant number of individuals directly, as well as the bystanders who witness it. Einarsen and Mikkelsen (2003) estimate, from their review of the research on bystanders, that there is at least one witness for every employee who is directly bullied, and over 80% of those who witness workplace bullying are negatively affected by it.

EFFECTS OF WORKPLACE BULLYING

Effects on Individual Employees

Employees who are bullied at work commonly experience reduced self-esteem, reduced life satisfaction, health problems, diminished credibility and effectiveness, increased incidence of substance abuse, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and suicidal and homicidal thoughts (which may or may not result in attempted homicide/suicide). When abusive conduct at work is

common knowledge, the impact spreads to those on its periphery, too. There is consensus in the current research literature that fear, anxiety, despair, difficulty concentrating, and reduced job satisfaction are widespread among those both directly and indirectly impacted by bullying (Einarsen & Mikkelsen, 2003).

Effects on the Organization

The workplace itself also suffers adverse consequences when bullying continues unchecked. Productivity is reduced. More time is spent by employees just watching their backs and trying to keep themselves safe. Absenteeism increases, and so does presenteeism (when one is physically at work but mentally absent). Counterproductive workplace behaviour of varying sorts contributes to a disrespectful or hostile work environment and accelerates staff turnover. As word gets out, both recruitment of new employees and customer loyalty are negatively affected. To the dollar costs of each of these elements, one can also add the cost of investigations, legal representation, and litigation (Hoel, Einarsen, & Cooper, 2003).

The Trajectory of Workplace Bullying Over Time

Without intervention, workplace bullying tends to escalate over time. Zapf et al. (2003) found that the longer bullying lasts against a particular individual, the more frequent it becomes, and the more people come to participate in the bullying. The physical and psychological consequences of bullying, for both its direct recipients and bystanders, also become more severe over time (Einarsen & Mikkelsen, 2003; Hershcovis & Barling, 2006; Zapf et al., 2003). Einarsen and Mikkelsen identified a pattern (also evident in McKay et al.'s 2008 Canadian study), in which bullied workers are systematically isolated, stressed, undermined and demoralized to the point where they become less able to cope with the stress and less effective in their jobs over time. Although usually engaging in constructive problem solving attempts at first, they frequently responded to the increasing pressure and their reduced personal coping capacity by engaging in behaviour that made their situation more desperate or even escalated the bullying. Given this trajectory of escalation with time, it is important to intervene as early as possible, or prevent bullying from occurring in the workplace in the first place.

PREVENTION OF WORKPLACE BULLYING

In their qualitative analysis of 148 organizational case studies, Hodson, Roscigno, and Lopez (2006) identified two critical variables that distinguished organizations in which bullying occurred from organizations in which it did not. One was *organizational coherence*, how well-organized and well-understood the organization's work procedures were, and how well these were integrated and monitored to ensure a well-functioning organization. The other critical factor was *relational powerlessness* among some members of the workforce due to factors such as low job security, minority status, or involvement in low-end service work, creating a pool of employees who are potentially vulnerable to bullying. Hodson and his colleagues found that among 32 organizations that had the combination of organizational coherence and low levels of relational powerlessness, only one had experienced bullying. In the 36 organizations that lacked organizational coherence

and had significant levels of relational powerlessness, 33 had experienced bullying. Relative equality of power or coherence alone provided some protection against bullying (12 of 31 such organizations had experienced bullying); the combination of the two factors functioned practically as a firewall against bullying.

Proactive Measures That Strengthen Organizational Coherence

To create and sustain a *positive* workplace climate that is safe, welcoming, inclusive and respectful is a multilayered undertaking. The findings that follow come from a wide variety of studies; they were also richly illustrated in many of the responses from the University of New Brunswick's qualitative study with managers, union representatives, human resources professionals, employee assistance programs, and others responsible for addressing bullying in their workplaces.

Leadership and management training. Whether it is accomplished through formal written rules and procedures or through team involvement in monitoring and controlling the work process, organizational coherence requires leadership. As we have seen, supervisors and managers are frequently a part of the problem themselves, failing to treat employees with civility, respect, and dignity (e.g., Dupré & Barling, 2006) and, indeed, engaging in bullying themselves (e.g., Rayner, 2005). Training in effective techniques for managing employees has the potential to replace such behaviour with constructive and positive leadership, and can also communicate more positive norms and expectations to employees.

Leaders may contribute to bullying more indirectly, through acts of omission. Leaders who avoid or put off making decisions, hesitate to take action, and are absent when needed (sometimes called *laissez-faire* leaders; e.g., Avolio, 1999) contribute to a lack of coherence in organizational functioning. They also contribute to role ambiguity, role conflict, and interpersonal conflict among employees (Skogstad, Einarsen, Torshiem, Aasland, & Hetland, 2007) all of which are powerful predictors of workplace harassment and bullying (Bowling & Beehr, 2006). It seems especially important that managers develop the skills to take action in resolving conflict. Disputes in the workplace frequently escalate and intensify power differences that can give rise to bullying (Rayner & Cooper, 2006). Although conflict in organizations is inevitable, and can be constructive, organizations and managers who do not have the means to deal with conflict may treat employees who raise concerns as though they are themselves the problem, or as troublemakers. Rather than dealing with the issue up front, they may fail to act, thus allowing mismanaged conflict to escalate into bullying, or bullying itself to become more severe (Fox & Stallworth, 2009). Training may be needed to help supervisors and managers recognize and deal specifically with workplace bullying (Harvey, Treadway, Heames, & Duke 2009). Without proper training, a manager could overlook, and thus enable, the most common (covert, indirect, and passive) types of bullying. Addressing conflict and concerns quickly, constructively, and in a serious manner will promote an environment where employees can express concern without fear of retaliation or trivialization of the problem.

Transformational or values-based leadership may be especially effective in preventing bullying (Kelley & Mullen 2006). Transformational leadership provides an organizational vision based on powerful shared values, articulates the connection between those values and organizational goals, recognizes and values individuals' unique needs and contributions, and sets a powerful example

of value-consistent behaviour. If the organization has strong key values that promote a respectful and secure work environment, such as equality, safety, professionalism, integrity, teamwork, collaboration, helping, or diversity (Fernandez & Hogan, 2002), this style of leadership could be a strong counterforce against bullying behaviour.

To address bullying effectively, the wise organization will also ensure that it has developed peer leadership, pockets of expertise in *soft skills* (training, coaching, counseling, facilitation, conflict transformation, and postvention) not only among those in formal positions of authority but throughout all levels of the organization. Informal helpers exist, *de facto*, in most organizations, but the role that they play in addressing conflict is often overlooked, and they tend to be left to their own devices, without institutional resources, training, debriefing, or moral support (Frost, 2003). Widespread training in conflict literacy and de-escalation skills could address a multitude of small altercations before they mushroom into major problems. This approach is also consistent with encouraging a more broadly based shared responsibility for keeping the workplace civil, decent, inclusive, respectful, and compassionate. Sensitized to workplace respect/disrespect and given rudimentary intervention skills through appropriate training, employees are better equipped to identify and handle problem situations early on, when they are more amenable to informal resolution.

Fostering an ethical climate that discourages bullying. It is important to promote an ethical climate that respects both the organization's needs and the safety of all its constituents. The ethical tone, set from the top down, guides all of its daily practices. Supervisors and managers, given their proximity, have a responsibility for upholding these principles at the work unit level. Bulutlar and Öz (2009) found that ethical climates that prioritized organizational profit over all else had high levels of every kind of bullying. Bullying was least common in organizations that had a strong principle-based ethical climate, in which policies to prevent bullying were clearly stated and enforced, either with or without reference to external laws or professional codes of conduct.

To improve an organization's culture, there needs to be solid commitment from both the top down and the bottom up. The input of the organization's front line (and all the layers in between) is essential in order to provide a realistic picture of the current climate, and to identify any unhealthy dynamics that need to be redressed. Senior administration needs to walk the talk; organizational leaders also need to be willing to commit the necessary time and resources to make this a serious institutional priority. Salin (2005) found that bullying behaviour was connected to a belief that such conduct would ultimately help people achieve desired workplace outcomes, such as a promotion. She recommended drawing a clear connection between bullying behaviour and the withholding of desired outcomes, to help curtail the behaviour. For example, if the consequence for engaging in bullying behaviour were a reduced likelihood of promotion, employees would be less likely to engage in that behaviour in the first place.

Promoting organizational justice. Employees need to be able to trust their organization to be fair and to address grievances appropriately. Organizational injustice is one of the most common organizational risk factors for workplace aggression, including workplace bullying (Hershcovis et al., 2007). Hershcovis and Barling (2006) have recommended improving organizational justice in three areas. To promote *distributive* justice, organizations should ensure that pay and other

organizational rewards are allocated equitably. They can promote *procedural* justice by making decisions that affect employees impartially and transparently, based on accurate information and prevailing ethical principles, by allowing for employee participation and the correction of mistakes, and by applying the results of their decisions consistently over time and across employees. *Interactional* justice can be promoted by providing a complete and honest explanation of decisions that affect employees, and by treating them with dignity and respect. It is critically important that management deal with “hot button” issues like performance appraisal, discipline, and layoffs (Kelley & Mullen, 2006) in a manner that is respectful, transparent, ethical, even-handed, and compassionate.

Reducing environmental and job stressors. Bullying and other forms of aggression are more common in workplaces that have a high level of ambient stress (Tuckey, Dollard, Hosking, & Winefield, 2009). A number of role stressors are significant risk factors (Hershcovis & Barling, 2006). Role conflict occurs when there are mixed messages or demands surrounding organizational tasks, obligations, privilege, and priorities (Einarsen, Raknes & Matthiesen, 1994). Role ambiguity results when roles are loosely defined, leaving room for confusion about what tasks to complete and who is to complete them. Role overload happens when management expectations or timelines are out of sync with employee capabilities. Organizations can reduce role stressors by redesigning overloaded or conflict-producing jobs, and by more clearly communicating role expectations. It is important to engage in broadly based discussion and consensus building about behavioural expectations and appropriate consequences for infractions, while remaining sensitive to organizational culture. It is a frequent mistake to assume that knowing how to behave appropriately at work is a matter of common sense; common sense is an oxymoron!

The physical working environment can be an important source of stress as well, raising the level of irritability and aggression due to factors such as extreme temperatures, dangerous conditions, noise, or pollutants. Baron (2004) has argued that the removal of such stressors would reduce aggressive behaviour of every kind in organizations. When the physical environment is conducive to singling out, cornering, working with lack of supervision, and working alone or in pairs, it can specifically and directly contribute to increased victimization (Harvey et al., 2009). To offset these factors, supervision can be increased, areas can be well lit, certain areas can be designated as having restricted access, and teamwork can be encouraged and actively rewarded.

Proactive Measures That Support Workplace Respect and Inclusion

In their study of ethical climates, Bulutlar and Ünler Öz (2009) unexpectedly found that organizations whose ethical climates emphasized caring (moral decision making based on friendship, team loyalty, or communal well-being) appeared to offer no protection from most forms of bullying. Although caring-based ethics are typically associated with many other positive outcomes (high job satisfaction and organizational commitment, low levels of most kinds of organizational misbehaviour; Martin & Cullen, 2006) their basis in friendship or group ties may prevent them from protecting vulnerable individuals perceived as “outsiders.” Put another way, “bonding” (group cohesion) can trump “bridging” (efforts to include those on the fringes), whereas a healthy climate keeps these tendencies in balance (Putnam, 2000). Clearly, relational powerlessness is a concern that warrants greater workplace attention.

A positive approach to diversity. As workplaces become increasingly diverse, diversity competence becomes ever more important, and organizations would be wise to introduce training in diversity competence. Differences in values, beliefs, assumptions, and expectations, when not well understood, can create a minefield. It is not enough simply to “tolerate” (put up with) diversity. Rather, organizations need to emphasize the richness and strength that is added by integrating many different points of view. In short, diversity needs to be embraced as a core value of the respectful workplace (MacIntosh, 2006). Buddy systems and mentoring have been used to assist in the transition of newly hired minority employees (Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment, 2005). Additionally, an organization can benefit from having a diversity officer (Fox & Stallworth, 2009).

Compassionate management of organizational change. Organizational change, by heightening concerns about job security and turf protection, can exacerbate the potential for bullying (Baillien & De Witte, 2009). Organizational restructuring brings its own challenges, because it changes the distribution of power in the organization. For example, a flatter structure and decentralization can lead to a redistribution of authority for organizational sanctions and control to the members of work teams, without strict lines of accountability for how this authority is used. Consequently, employees may punish or even expel co-workers who perform poorly or are otherwise considered undesirable, especially if the organization adopts team-based compensation and increased requirements for cooperation in the completion of tasks (Salin, 2003). Layoffs and downsizing are especially likely to increase the vulnerability to bullying among those whose job security is threatened (Braverman, 2002; Hodson et al., 2006). When organizational restructuring is occurring, employees deserve to be informed of what is happening inside and outside the organization. Open access to this information helps to level out those power imbalances that can lead to bullying.

EARLY RECOGNITION AND EARLY INTERVENTION

Many formal workplace bullying policies kick in only after a situation has escalated to a fairly high threshold, and focus primarily on formal intervention. While such policies have their place, in most instances more lasting results would be achieved if earlier and more informal measures were attempted. When the problem is intercepted earlier on, there is a much greater likelihood of turning the situation around and bringing about lasting change in attitudes and behaviours. Once workplace bullying has become deeply entrenched, there is a reduced probability of bringing about meaningful change (Braverman & Denenberg, 1999).

Imagine the plight of an employee who has been engaging in bullying but receiving no significant corrective feedback over a period of many years, and who is suddenly told that his or her conduct is unacceptable. To describe this as jarring and unsettling is an understatement. It takes time to absorb and process such a message, and during that period, this individual is also very much in need of counseling, coaching, and sometimes soft skills training. Many organizations are quick to provide such services to employees who are bullied, but may neglect to examine the emotional needs of the party accused of bullying.

In many instances, efforts are focused on working with both parties to modify dysfunctional attitudes and behaviours and to restore, insofar as possible, a sound working relationship between them. That's fine, as far as it goes. But if they are thrown back into a work climate that allowed inappropriate behaviour to occur in the first place, then that may be setting them up to slide back into old patterns, *unless intervention also occurs with the rest of the work unit. It's crucial to remember that bullying is systemic in nature, not just an individual problem or a simple personality conflict.*

PRACTICAL THINGS WE CAN DO TO ADDRESS WORKPLACE BULLYING

Informal Workplace Bullying Interventions

Informal individual measures. A range of possibilities can be explored before resorting to formal complaint and investigation mechanisms. Most employees who find themselves questioning whether what they're experiencing is bullying would be wise to begin by keeping records of any incidents they consider troubling or questionable. It is important to note dates and times, who was present, the details of what happened, and anyone who might have seen or overheard what transpired. Concrete, specific, objective detail is important. For instance, rather than writing, "He intimidated me", one would want to be more descriptive: "He burst into my office without knocking, flinging the door against the wall. He loomed over me and shouted in my face while I was seated at my desk, and blocked the only exit from my workspace." This level of detail allows a third party examining the situation to get a much more richly textured sense of *what* has occurred and *how* it played out.

The parties would also do well to share their concerns with someone whom they trust to be a reliable sounding board and reality check. This person needs to be a good enough friend to be able to point out ways in which the individual who has come to them may be contributing to the discord, able to help them identify triggers or patterns in the situation, and objective enough to point out behaviour by either party that crosses the line. Awareness, information, and education regarding workplace respect/disrespect also need to be disseminated among the general public, since most people troubled by workplace bullying will first seek advice from someone *outside* their workplace. For these early sounding boards to be well-informed, public awareness needs to be increased.

Informal interpersonal measures. In some cases, it may be possible for the parties to talk things through and put an end to the bullying. In their review, Aquino and Thau (2009) found that constructive engagement with the perpetrator occasionally helped alleviate the negative effects for someone who was being bullied, although the power differential made this a risky and uncommon response. In fact, they found that the level of bullying often escalated after such a confrontation. If the employee who is being bullied feels very intimidated but wants to try constructive communication as a way of changing the relationship, there is a chance that it may work. However, it may require some coaching or role playing first, by way of preparation. In many cases, it will require intervention from a third party because of the power differential inherent in bullying.

Informal third party helpers. If it feels unsafe to have a direct conversation, the parties may want to enlist the help of a skilled person who can be the “third side of the triangle”, assisting them to have a difficult conversation in a fair and respectful manner (Ury, 1999). Informal helpers exist in most organizations (Frost, 2003) and organizations could benefit from providing them with training, support, and recognition for the important role they play.

Managers or supervisors. Although their involvement is likely to be more formal, managers or supervisors may be the ones chosen by the parties to intervene. This intervention may take the form of facilitating dialogue between or among the parties, or it may entail speaking with them separately, sometimes relaying concerns that the other party is hesitant to discuss directly.

Informal group response. Bystanders may respond as a group to bullying behaviour when they observe it. In the University of New Brunswick study, one of the respondents described an informal collective action by peers to address bullying behaviour called “Code Pink.” The principle behind Code Pink was for bystanders to rally to the support of the person being bullied, an action that also sends an implicit message to the person engaging in bullying, about revisiting his or her conduct.

Counsellors or coaches. Counselling is an important support to offer to both of the central parties in a bullying situation. Both will be under stress, and will be in need of emotional support and good coping strategies. Coaching may be appropriate to help one or both parties modify the ways in which they interact with others, and to become more aware of their impact on others. This may also be extended to the rest of the work group, in cases where it is determined that they, too, are contributing to unhealthy workplace dynamics.

An informal restorative approach. Westhues (Westhues, 2007a, 2007b) invites organizations working toward a respectful and inclusive workplace to begin by asking themselves what values govern their approach to workplace bullying. Is the goal punishment or helping people to work through their difficulties? The qualitative research at the University of New Brunswick has demonstrated that many employees who have been bullied are primarily concerned that the mistreatment stop, and that it not to happen again to them or to anyone else. Surprisingly, punishing the person who has bullied them seldom features in their agenda. They sometimes explicitly state, “I don’t want the bully to be fired. I just want this to stop.” Quite commonly, they want acknowledgement of the hurt that has been inflicted, a meaningful apology, and assurances that they and others will be kept safe from further harm. Even in cases where monetary compensation has been provided, it is difficult for most injured parties to lay the matter to rest without this effort at what the Quakers call “restoration of right relationship”. At a very human level, it seems that many parties crave a more restorative approach, while many policies tend to focus on retribution.

Restorative justice is *not* “soft on the offender”. On the contrary, alternative dispute resolution seeks to have perpetrators take full ownership of their behaviour, and to fully understand its impact on both its direct recipients and the wider circle of bystanders. This requires very skillful facilitation, but can pay significant dividends as a means of clearing the air and healing the ruptures that have occurred.

Formal Workplace Bullying Interventions

For workplaces already experiencing bullying, intervention is essential. Unfortunately, little experimental research has been conducted on the effectiveness of different workplace bullying interventions, and this is an area that is in need of more research attention. However, based on theoretical work and individual case studies, it appears that different levels of intervention can be brought to bear, depending on the culture of the organization and the extent of the problem. These levels are commonly referred to as first and second stage interventions.

First stage intervention. First stage interventions can be used in instances where there are few and/or relatively low-level instances of bullying; that is, where bullying goes *against* the predominant culture of the workplace. In cases such as these, bullying can be occurring simply because it is not being recognized as such by supervisors, the employees doing the bullying, or even the employees being bullied. Many of the best practices for effective prevention of workplace bullying discussed earlier are also useful for this level of intervention; often, education about bullying has substantial benefit.

In the case of first stage intervention, beginning the process of education about workplace bullying can have spin-off benefits. Initiating an awareness program about bullying can lead individuals currently engaged in bullying behaviour to reflect on their own conduct. Putting the “bullying” label to behaviours can often be a powerful wake-up call. In organizational cultures where first stage intervention is appropriate (where open bullying would not be tolerated), bullying is especially likely to take on more covert forms. Goodridge, Johnston, and Thomson (1997) reported success in training people to recognize covert forms of bullying, and found that this training could decrease the occurrence of conflict. By extension, training supervisors to recognize these covert forms of bullying can enable them to begin the process of intervention at the earliest sign of onset.

Finally, as with *any* program focused on bullying (be it prevention, or either first or second stage intervention), it is essential to create safe, confidential opportunities for employees to report instances of bullying. One of the biggest challenges is making it safe to report inappropriate conduct. In order for employees to do this, they need to be certain that they will be protected from reprisal. Even if workplace bullying is initially perceived by management as an insignificant matter or a non-issue, a safe reporting mechanism may reveal that it is more of a problem than was initially apparent. Runyan, Zakocs, and Zwerling (2000) found that frequent and regular performance reviews with employees offered them a guaranteed and expected meeting time with their supervisors and that, when prompted, employees very often used these opportunities to express grievances. In a first stage intervention scenario, this can be a good way to gauge the extent of the problem; as we discussed earlier, opening up the dialogue on bullying is an important and difficult first step.

Second stage intervention. It is possible for an organizational culture to sink to such a level that the climate becomes toxic. In such situations, workplace bullying may be more the rule than the exception. Barring the dismissal of all employees and starting fresh – a most unlikely option for nearly any organization – more directed interventions are necessary to correct the problem. These

initiatives fall under the category of second stage intervention. It must be noted here that these are *additional* steps to the first stage intervention; when an organization is at the second stage of intervention, the components of first stage intervention remain important.

Bullying arises from an imbalance of power. Therefore, although peers, subordinates, and clients can be sources of bullying, it is quite common for employees to be bullied by their supervisors or managers. In toxic cultures, there is an especially high likelihood that a supervisor may be involved in bullying behaviours. Because of this, it is important to have an avenue available for reporting instances of bullying other than an employee's direct supervisor, especially in cultures warranting second stage intervention.

Finally, it is important to remember that there is appropriate legal recourse that can be taken. If bullying behaviour becomes physical, the criminal code prohibits physical abuse. As well, some provinces have legislation specifically dealing with workplace bullying, and for those that don't, sections under workers compensation board acts and health and safety acts can often be used in instances of bullying. Depending on the nature of the harassment, human rights legislation may also be relevant.

Federal government initiatives and legislation on workplace violence and bullying. Because occupational health and safety falls within provincial/territorial jurisdiction, there are no federal laws that govern workplace violence across Canada (excepting, of course, those actions that are covered under the criminal code, such as physical violence). However, the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS), has produced a *Violence in the Workplace Prevention Guide* (CCOHS, *n.d.*). The guide is designed as a training and reference tool that organizations can use to educate their employees on the issue of workplace incivility by teaching them how to identify the problem, how to deal with cases of aggression (including reactions to violence and bullying, and reporting), and how to care for victims. The guide also has resources and practical tips for organizational-level actions, such as developing victim support services, and developing prevention and training programs. Federally regulated workplaces are also covered by the Canada Labour Code, which states that all employers have the duty to "ensure that the health and safety at work of every person employed by the employer is protected" (Canada Labour Code, 1985). CCOHS has taken this duty to include the prevention of harassment and bullying.

Provincial / territorial government initiatives and legislation on workplace violence and bullying. Most provinces and territories have broad policies that deal with workplace health and safety, with sections specifically considering workplace violence, whose definitions can be applied to cases of workplace bullying. For example, British Columbia's states that "a person must not engage in any improper activity or behaviour at a workplace that might create or constitute a hazard to themselves or to any other person" (Workers Compensation Act, 1996). This is representative of most policies. What can be considered a "hazard" is open to interpretation and is taken on a case-by-case basis. Often the case has to be made that bullying behaviour has had a hazardous effect on an individual or organization.

Some provinces have taken more decisive action on the prevention of workplace bullying. In 2004, Quebec revised its Labour Standards Act to include a section on psychological harassment, stating that "every employee has a right to a work environment free from psychological

harassment,” and that “employers must take reasonable action to prevent psychological harassment and, whenever they become aware of such behaviour, to put a stop to it”. The Act defines “psychological harassment” as “any vexatious behaviour in the form of repeated and hostile or unwanted conduct, verbal comments, actions or gestures, that affects an employee’s dignity or psychological or physical integrity and that results in a harmful work environment for the employee” (An Act Respecting Labour Standards, 2002). In 2007, Saskatchewan revised its Occupational Health and Safety Act to place an onus on employers as part of their duties to “ensure, insofar as is reasonably practicable, that the employer’s workers are not exposed to harassment with respect to any matter or circumstance arising out of the workers’ employment”. It defines “harassment” as any act that “adversely affects the worker’s psychological or physical well-being and that the person knows or ought reasonably to know would cause a worker to be humiliated or intimidated” (Occupational Health and Safety Act, 1993). In December of 2009, the province of Ontario passed Bill 168, which specifically addresses workplace harassment, defining it as “conduct against a worker in a workplace that is known or ought reasonably to be known to be unwelcome” (Occupational Health and Safety Amendment Act, 2009).

Best Practices for organizational policies on workplace bullying. Even if an employee who is experiencing bullying at work does not live in a jurisdiction that has clear legislation on workplace bullying, there may be relevant organizational policies in place to address bullying problems, often emerging from the collective bargaining process. For organizations considering developing a policy, Duffy (2009) summarizes some best practices, and concludes that effective workplace bullying policies include the following:

1. *Purpose of the policy.* A clear statement of the purpose of the policy should be provided, along with a reference to the core organizational values that the policy is intended to support.
2. *Statement about bullying.* The policy should include a definition and description of bullying, including a statement of its negative effects on those involved, and on the organization. Duffy describes this statement outlining the human and organizational costs as critical to help employees understand why there is a need for such a policy.
3. *Examples of bullying behaviours.* Examples of bullying behaviours should be provided to further educate employees about it, and increase the likelihood that they will recognize it in any of its forms when it occurs.
4. *Identification of contact persons at all levels of the organization for reporting instances of mobbing/bullying.* Bullying can occur at many different levels of the organization, so it is crucial to have a range of safe and confidential methods of reporting it. Often, this can be a union representative or a human resources officer or some other designated point of contact (management, administration, and staff). Failure to identify contact persons at all levels of an organization and clustering the contact persons at the staff or labour level sends the erroneous message that bullying occurs primarily at those levels of an organization. No single point of contact within a given workplace will be adequate for every situation that might arise. No two organizations are identical, so solutions need to be sensitive to organizational context.
5. *Formal charge or grievance.* Duffy recommends clear, written procedures for receiving, handling, and investigating formal charges of workplace mobbing and bullying. These procedures should be published and accessible throughout the organization. They should be open and transparent

in describing how an investigation will be conducted, who will conduct it, and how evidence will be evaluated.

6. *Informal and alternative resolution options.* Because employees often prefer an informal resolution option for bullying complaints, Duffy recommends that informal dispute resolution should be available. Duffy recommends that this option involve facilitated dialogue to address and resolve issues of bullying, while maintaining the dignity of all parties. Westhues (2007a, 2007b) has outlined two alternative approaches to policy around workplace decency, hinging on the distinction drawn earlier between retributive and restorative justice models. Westhues' approach encourages greater clarity about the foundational principles on which any workplace policy is built and opens the issue up to consideration of a range of more informal measures that encourage the parties to talk things through before resorting to more legalistic avenues.
7. *Alternative formal dispute resolution options.* Duffy also recommends that alternative formal resolution mechanisms be made available if both parties choose to use them, such as mediation towards a written negotiated agreement. He takes a formative consequences approach to the restorative justice framework, in which those who have engaged in bullying would contribute in specific ways to the fostering of positive workplace relationships.
8. A statement that due process and confidentiality will be provided to all parties.
9. *Time frame.* In the interests of procedural justice, and to prevent complicating negative consequences to those who have been bullied, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, Duffy describes organizations as having the responsibility to conduct a thorough and fair investigation, but in the shortest possible time.
10. *Reporting of findings.* Duffy recommends delivering the findings of the investigation to the parties separately, although both should be given the right to be accompanied. He recommends delivering them orally, with an opportunity to ask questions, followed by a written statement.
11. *Accountability and sanctions.* A finding of workplace bullying should lead to an internal evaluation of the organizational context in which it occurred, to identify and correct contributing factors. Formal and informal sanctions should be available for those found to have perpetrated workplace bullying.
12. *Appeals process.* Duffy recommends that an appeal process be part of the written policy published, and accessible to all workers, which could be used by either party.

A fresh look at policy. It is only fair to help employees to understand that, in varying degrees, multiple parties contribute to the escalation of most negative workplace dynamics. (To believe that these situations are black and white is wishful thinking.) Recognizing this at the outset can encourage all of the parties to reconsider their own behaviour, prepare them more realistically for any intervention or investigative process that may follow, and help them to deal more constructively with the outcomes of such processes. We believe that addressing workplace bullying will require all of the parties to be involved in solutions – those who have engaged in bullying, those who have been bullied, and bystanders. To this end, we see Kenneth Westhues' approach as offering fresh opportunities for repairing damaged workplace relationships, and moving forward with a sense of shared responsibility for the future.

When a workplace bullying incident results in a formal investigation, the outcomes are often shrouded in confidentiality. While it is important to protect the dignity of individuals involved, it also needs to be recognized that failure to disclose essential information undermines faith in the effectiveness of the process. If all that is said is, “A complaint was filed, an investigation was carried out, and appropriate action was taken”, then this asks the people in that workplace to place an inordinate amount of faith in a system about which they probably already harbour serious misgivings. In some jurisdictions, investigators are being encouraged to present their findings in a manner that allows these reports to be shared more openly. While the identities of witnesses need to be safeguarded, there is a growing movement that favours more open disclosure of investigation findings. Equipped with better information, all of the parties are better able to reexamine their own conduct, and to ensure that they are helping, rather than hindering, efforts to create and sustain a more inclusive and respectful workplace climate.

It is very hard to change an organization’s culture from the outside (e.g., Kotter, 1996), so organizations need to assess whether particular policies and procedures are an appropriate fit for their key values and for the kinds of disruptive and problematic behaviours they are actually experiencing. In order to evaluate this, they need to put in place a reliable way of mapping incidents and monitoring trends over time. Policies need to be treated as living documents, evolving as circumstances change. Whatever procedures are put in place also need to be practical and easy to implement.

Beyond policy. Putting in place clear expectations, consequences, and procedures is undeniably important. But policy alone is not enough. Achieving a workplace free of bullying is *everyone’s shared responsibility*. From the frontlines to the board room, it takes broadly based commitment to ensure that everyone is treated with dignity and respect. Why is this so crucial? University of New Brunswick’s *Towards a Respectful Workplace* website puts it this way: “Imagine a world where everyone looked forward to going to work, and came home at the end of their working day feeling good about how they had spent their time. Work doesn’t just put food on the table and a roof over our heads. It’s central to our sense of identity, meaning and purpose, achievement, and belonging. It’s important to us to feel that what we do makes good use of our skills and abilities, that our work matters, that our efforts are appreciated, and that we are accepted and valued by the people with whom we work - in short, that our workplace is respectful.” Working towards safe, inclusive, and respectful workplaces isn’t a luxury. It is essential to our collective social and economic wellbeing.

KEY MESSAGES

- Bullying, harassment, abuse, and discrimination hinge on power differences and are forms of disrespect, which have no place in the workplace.
- Workplace bullying needs to be identified and addressed at the earliest possible opportunity if intervention is to succeed in changing behaviours and attitudes in a meaningful and lasting way.
- Practical informal and formal actions to address workplace bullying provide opportunities for repairing damaged workplace relationships, and moving forward with a sense of shared responsibility for the future
- Achieving a workplace free of bullying is *everyone's shared responsibility*. Effective prevention requires the creation of a safe, respectful and inclusive workplace for all employees
- Addressing workplace bullying requires a range of options including counselling, coaching, facilitation, mediation, and formal investigation.

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