

Workplace Bullying Causes and Solutions

Workplace Stress Initiative, 2007

An Ottawa transit worker was teased and humiliated by his coworkers because of his speech impediment and a facial tic. In 1999, the worker shot and killed four workers before killing himself.

A supervisor in Alberta humiliated, insulted and harassed a female worker for over three years. The worker began to fear physical violence and on one occasion, the supervisor physically hurt her. The worker then had a mental breakdown.

These workers were victims of workplace bullying. Bullying is **repeated** behaviour that intimidates, offends, degrades or humiliates a particular person or group of people. The following is not an exhaustive list, but gives some examples of bullying behaviour:

- persistent criticism
- excluding a person from conversations or activities
- withholding information that is important for effective work performance
- undervaluing effort
- spreading malicious rumours
- taking credit for other people's ideas

Bullying may come from a superior, a co-worker or other person in the workplace. But in two large studies on workplace bullying, managers were identified as most likely to be the perpetrator of bullying. (Rayner, 1998) (Hoel & Cooper, 2000).

Certain risk factors in the workplace have been identified that set the stage for workplace bullying (Leymann, 1990):

- deficiencies in work design
- deficiencies in leadership behaviour
- a socially exposed position of the victim
- low morale

Effects of bullying

Victims of bullying in the workplace may blame themselves and develop low self-esteem. Victims often experience symptoms of stress and trauma which can lead to illnesses such as headaches, sleep and eating disorders, depression and anxiety. In extreme cases, victims of bullying have committed suicide or homicide.

If left unresolved, workplace bullying can lead to prolonged sick leaves and high turnover rates when competent employees feel their only recourse to end the harassment is to leave their jobs. It can also result in poor employee morale and decreased productivity among employees.

A recent 2007 survey of bullying victims by the Workplace Bullying Institute found

- 45% of victims suffered stress-related health problems

- 40% of victims never complained about the bullying to their employer

- In 62% of the cases, when employers became aware of the bullying, they worsened the problem or simply did nothing

- In 77% of cases, the bullying only stopped when the victims left their jobs (quit, laid off, or transferred)

Putting a Stop to Bullying

A healthy workplace where each individual is treated with dignity and respect will help prevent bullying. The Workplace Stress Initiative recommends the following strategies for government and workplaces:

Legislation

In Quebec, labour standards state that “Every employee has a right to work in an environment free from psychological harassment. Employers must take reasonable action to prevent psychological harassment and, whenever they become aware of such behaviour, to put a stop to it.”

Legislation also came into force in Saskatchewan on October 1, 2007 to prohibit forms of psychological harassment such as bullying under the Occupational Health and Safety Act.

Quebec's three years of experience with this legislation point toward the need for preventative measures that would avoid many instances of reproachable conduct reported by employee complainants. Surveys show that up to one in ten Quebec workers have been subject to bullying.

The most effective way to deal with disrespect and bullying in the workplace is to address it before it becomes an established pattern of behaviour. In many cases, informal processes can find solutions to disputes and improve working relationships. But sometimes formal complaints are necessary when the behaviours and circumstances are extreme, or in the case of a power imbalance between a manager and employee. In the U.K., all employers are legally required to have a minimum procedure for resolving disputes.¹

Awareness Campaign

Consistent with the experience learned in Quebec, employers and employees need to understand what workplace bullying is and how to address it. Government needs to support the development and implementation of a prevention-based awareness campaign, similar to the one currently underway in Quebec, to assist employers and employees understand that bullying behaviour is not acceptable in the workplace.

Respectful Workplace Culture & Policy

A Respectful Workplace policy ensures that both management and workers are trained in expected workplace behaviour and held responsible for their behaviour. Any complaints of disrespect, harassment or bullying are investigated and dealt with promptly.

A Respectful Workplace policy often contains provisions for **conflict resolution** in the workplace. It can ensure that employees receive conflict resolution training and establish a process to follow when employees have conflict. The policy should also ensure that all management are skilled in handling conflict. This prevents workplace conflict from developing into destructive behaviour and patterns such as bullying.

¹ Guidance on the Employment Act 2002 (Dispute Resolution) Regulations 2004

Support for employees

Both victims and bullies require support when dealing with bullying behaviour in the workplace. It is very helpful if workplaces have in place Employee Assistance Programs that can offer confidential support and counselling as employees deal with the bullying behaviour.

Who we are

The Workplace Stress Initiative is a collaborative partnership that promotes healthy workplace practices to reduce workplace stress in Manitoba. Members include employers, labour unions and social service agencies. The Workplace Stress Initiative was formed in 2001 in response to workplace stress as an emerging health issue.

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