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Workplace bullying's high cost: \$180M in lost time, productivity

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You're in the high school lunch room and a familiar, fear-inspiring shadow crosses your back. In science class, a spitball makes a wet "splat" on your new sweater or worse, the back of your head.

The culprit? The schoolyard bully. For most of us, dealing with the bully -- whether watching him or her in action or being the target of bullying ourselves -- was an unpleasant but inseparable aspect of attending school.

It shouldn't be a part of work.

Unfortunately, workplace bullying has existed since the dawn of employment, according to most psychologists and human resource experts. But tolerance for its various forms is declining swiftly as academicians release new statistics detailing its human and bottom-line dollar costs.

At work, no spitballs please

So-called workplace bullies usually prefer memos, informal disciplinary meetings and grinding criticism to spitballs.

According to Gary Namie, Ph.D., founder of the Campaign Against Workplace Bullying, adults employ various types of what he prefers to call "psychological violence," which demoralizes and distracts both the target of bullying and co-workers aware of the bully's efforts.

Bullying also is unlike sexual or racial harassment, although it may be seen as a related problem. Instead of looking at whether a target is male, female, black, white or Asian, he or she chooses a victim based on his or her own needs and insecurities.

And, yes, women bully their co-workers as much as men. Namie says his research shows a nearly 50-50 split. However, a 1998 study out of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill showed that workplace bullies are more than twice as likely to be male.

Namie, who founded the Campaign in 1998, is a social psychologist and a professor at Western Washington University in Bellingham, Wash. His organization defines bullying as "the repeated, health-endangering, illegitimate mistreatment of a person by a cruel perpetrator driven by his or her need to control the target of mistreatment."

Such action "defeats, rather than serves, a legitimate business purpose ... affecting the health and career of targeted individuals and paralyzing the workplace with fear."

The bottom line: Bullies are expensive

For managers and CEOs who question the wisdom of delving into what had been perceived as an inseparable part of workplace politics, the bottom line is the answer, says James R. Meindl, Donald S. Carmichael professor of organization and human resources at the University of Buffalo School of Management.

"Human resource managers are beginning to realize there is a real productivity cost to these kinds of things."

Psychologist Michael H. Harrison, Ph.D., of **Harrison Psychological Associates**, quotes a recent survey of 9,000 federal employees indicating that 42 percent of female and 15 percent of male employees reported being harassed within a two-year period, resulting in a cost of more than \$180 million in lost time and productivity.

"This kind of harassment has a huge impact on a company's bottom line," he says.

Among the sources of these high costs are high absenteeism resulting from time off taken by harassed employees, reduced productivity among workers who are nursing emotional wounds and stress-related illnesses, or trying to appease or avoid their harasser.

High turnover is another economic drain. According to Namie's studies, 82 percent of people targeted by a bully leave their workplace: 38 percent for their health; 44 percent, because they were victims of a performance appraisal system manipulated to show them as incompetent. Human resource experts peg the cost of replacing an employee at two to three times that person's salary.

Health care costs also may rise for a company, as a bully's targets become affected by stress-related illnesses. According to Namie, 41 percent of bully targets become depressed, with 31 percent of targeted women and 21 percent of targeted men being diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder.

"The person may keep experiencing or remembering being belittled and berated and becomes fearful and phobic," says Harrison. Medical symptoms develop based on the person's weakest body systems -- headaches and backaches are common.

"Our bodies tell us when things are not going well."

Customer service also will suffer, as harassed employees lose their feeling of loyalty to a company that is not protecting them from the bully. Both targets and co-workers may take out their frustrations on clients.

Statistics reported by the American Psychological Association estimate that of 1,500 workers surveyed, about 750 said they lost time from work due to rude workplace behavior directed toward them, says Tim Osberg, Ph.D., professor of psychology at Niagara University, who has a part-time practice in clinical psychology.

Taking action

The best defense against a bully is taking action -- any kind of action -- to warn the perpetrator that his or her behavior is unacceptable, experts say.

The target of a bully should warn him or her verbally or, ideally, in writing -- with a copy of the note sent to the bully's supervisor or, in case the supervisor is the bully, the company's CEO or human resources department, Harrison says.

"That's enough to stop some bullies. They're on notice that you're not going to take it from them and will involve people who can make life uncomfortable for them," he says.

As soon as the target realizes he or she is being targeted by a workplace bully, another important step is to be sure that there are no one-on-one meetings with that person.

If these actions fail and the company seems unwilling to take action or discipline the harasser, Harrison and other experts say the Labor Department or a lawyer is the final step. If workplace harassment isn't stopped, the employee should quit before his or her health suffers.

Corporate approach

In hopes of preventing economic losses, some companies have developed training programs and blanket anti-harassment policies that encompass bullying.

The programs may include everything from a video program shown to new hires and periodically to other employees to address various types of workplace harassment, to panel discussions or short sequences dramatizing examples of harassment.

Experts add that a culturally diverse workplace makes it important to focus on the company's policy against racial or ethnic discrimination and harassment.

And it's important to continue the training, says Harrison. "I think people become less productive when they're joked about and put down. It's also no fun to be around. I think that if I saw it happening in the workplace, I'd want to do something about it."

Section 5a of the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration's regulations require employers to provide a safe and healthy workplace for all employees and is known as the "general duty" clause. Employers could be held liable in situations where it was proven that threats and other actions by an individual "bully" constitute a workplace hazard, Harrison says.

Harrison says he has had clients tell him about verbal or sexual harassment at work, having false, detrimental rumors spread about them or having tools stolen or moved around by workplace bullies.

If the bully is a supervisor, they may have personalities where they consistently get their work messages across in a hostile or demanding way and often criticize employees in front of other people.

"They bully and badger the person rather than dealing with the performance issue," he says.

National statistics also show a sharp increase in workplace harassment and violence since the 1980s, Harrison says.

Economic stress and downsizing, and increased awareness and support for harassment victims, are the most likely reasons for the increasing reports, he says.

Namie says he believes there also may be more workplace harassment in smaller cities where the overall economy is foundering because employees believe they have fewer options to leave or find another job.

This makes them more willing to accept, and less likely to report, workplace violence.

"What determines the level of bullying in the workplace is an individual who feels they have a license to mistreat someone and never be held accountable," he says.

Liz Urbanski Farrell is a staff writer for Business First, a sister publication of Orlando Business Journal.

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