WORKPLACE BULLYING:  
A SILENT EPIDEMIC IN THE AMERICAN WORKFORCE

Christopher Ko  
Central Contra Costa Sanitary District

INTRODUCTION

Workplace bullying, like childhood bullying, is the tendency of individuals or groups to use persistent aggressive or unreasonable behavior against a co-worker. For many of us, the word “bully” brings back memories of a playground bully from our childhood days. Yet, workplace bullying has become one of the most difficult areas to address in handling employee discipline for today’s human resources professionals.

Workplace bullying is defined as the repeated mistreatment of one employee who is targeted by one or more employees with a malicious mix of humiliation, intimidation and sabotage of performance. It includes being ridiculed in the presence of other employees, being lied about to others, inducing feelings of always being on guard, not being able to focus on work tasks, loss of self-confidence on the job, out-of-control anxiety, being continually left “out of the loop,” and being repeatedly criticized without just cause. Simply stated, workplace bullies use their authority to undermine, frighten, or intimidate another person, often leaving the victim feeling fearful, powerless, incompetent, and ashamed. In a report published by the Washington Department of Labor and Industries, it further clarified that workplace bullying often involves an abuse or misuse of power.

Although simply being tough or demanding at work does not necessarily label an individual as a bully, the exhibition of one or more of the following behaviors should cause HR professionals to be concerned about the existence of bullying in the workplace:

- Unwarranted or invalid criticism.
- Blame without factual justification.
- Being treated differently than the rest of the work group.
- Being sworn at.
- Exclusion or social isolation.
- Being shouted at or being humiliated.
- Being the target of practical jokes.
- Excessive monitoring.

Although workplace bullying has not been a frequent concern for HR professionals in the past, the statistics of employees being bullied at work have increased during recent years. The Workplace Bullying Institute (WBI) found in a 2007 national survey that 37 percent of the U.S. workforce, or 54 million employees, have been bullied now or at some time during their work life. According to Gary Namie, Director of WBI, this alarming rate represents a silent epidemic in the American workforce. This study became the U.S. Workplace Bullying Survey (WBI...
Survey), the first national scientific poll of its kind. The results of this survey will be shared in later segments of this research paper.

While most American workers are familiar with sexual and racial harassment, many of them are not familiar with workplace bullying. Therefore, victims of workplace bullying often do not know how to respond or react. Furthermore, bullying rarely begins with a “bang.” It tends to be a subtle process of intimidation and criticism rather than erupting in a single event. As weeks and months go by, the bullying not only continues, but gradually intensifies to the point of being relentless. Once the victim realizes that he/she is being bullied, it is difficult for him to realize what is ahead.

The consequences of bullying can be significant, including the loss of morale, which often leads to an unmotivated workforce. Employees may be afraid of the perpetrator, thus empowering the perpetrator to continue bullying behavior thinking that he/she can get away with it.

In an attempt to reveal the consequences of bullying, Sarah Tracy, a researcher of Arizona State University, interviewed 17 women and 10 men ranging from 26 to 72 years old, who had experienced bullying. In her interview, she found that people often have trouble putting into words their emotions surrounding bully behavior. Some of the responses include feeling beaten, abused, ripped, broken, scared, eviscerated, maimed, and having their character assassinated. Bullies, on the other hand, were described as two-faced actors, narcissistic dictators and devils, leading workers to feel like vulnerable children, slaves and prisoners in these situations.

Targets of bullying not only suffer from stress in the workplace, but may also experience physical and mental health problems. Victims have reported symptoms such as high stress, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), reduced self-esteem, musculoskeletal problems, phobias, sleep disturbances, increased depression, self-blame, and digestive problems. If stress, depression and physical health problems continue, they may result in time away from work that contribute to increased workers’ compensation claims as well as lost productivity. In California, job stress-related workers’ compensation claims have cost employers almost $1 billion in medical and legal fees alone. An average award of $15,000 is spent on stress-related claims as compared to a national average of $3,420. Some victims may also suffer from financial losses due to extenuated absences. In the worse case scenario, victims reported social withdrawal and isolation, leading to substance abuse and other self-destructive habits such as actual and attempted suicide.

However, bullying does not only impact its victims. Employees witnessing the bullying are also affected in the ways of morale and productivity. Also, employees may begin to lose respect for management for tolerating bullying, fearing they could be the next victim. As a result, employees may begin to lose respect for management for tolerating bullying, fearing they could be the next victim. As a result, employees may limit interactions with the perpetrator or avoid contact with the perpetrator altogether. The breakdown of trust in a bullying environment could cause employees to fail to contribute their best work, not give extra ideas for improvement, not provide feedback on failures and be less honest about performance. Thus overall productivity of the department, as well as the organization, would suffer.
This phenomenon is confirmed by a recent study conducted by two management professors from the University of Florida and University of Southern California. In their study published in the *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* journal, Professors Amir Erez and Christine Porath found that simply observing discourteous behavior can erode fellow employees’ abilities to think creatively, solve problems and act as good team players. Essentially, bullying had the same effect on secondhand targets as it had on the primary targets, and it affected them in the same way. This study is significant as it demonstrated that bullying has a major impact at work. As a result, HR professionals should be aware of bullying and promptly address such behavior in the workplace.

In three experimental studies, Professors Erez and Porath found that witnessing bullying behavior enacted by an authority figure (Studies 1 and 3) and a peer (Study 2) reduced observers’ performance on routine, as well as creative, tasks. In all three studies they also found that witnessing bullying decreased citizenship behaviors and increased dysfunctional ideation. Furthermore, negative affect blurred the relationship between witnessing rudeness and performance. Simply stated, bullying de-motivates employees and affects both the victim and the witness.

In fact, when left unresolved, workplace bullying can lead to high turnover and exposes the organization to potential legal issues. Victims may resign from employment and the organization must replace staff. Other staff members who witness the bullying spend time away from performing work to cope, and as a result, productivity suffers. Furthermore, employers must spend a tremendous amount of time and effort to investigate ill treatment, and missteps during the investigation can lead to harassment or discrimination claims.

In an article published in *Human Resource Executive*, Talent-Management Consultant Michael O’Brien stated that bullying lowers overall team performance and consequently, company performance. Mr. O’Brien interviewed Kurt Ronn, president and founder of recruitment firm HR Works, who stated that workplace bullying contributes to a hostile work environment which can bring legal and financial ramifications.

Before I continue, I wish to clarify that although bullying in the workplace itself is not an illegal activity, it is often tied to harassment or discrimination claims. An individual may perceive bullying as a form of harassment which is defined as offensive and unwelcome conduct serious enough to adversely affect the terms and conditions of a person’s employment. An individual may also perceive bullying as a form of discrimination based on a protected class. Also, bullying is illegal when it involves sexual contact, physical violence, or is directed towards individuals who have “protected status” under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the American with Disabilities Act, or the Age Discrimination in Employment Act. State laws also extend additional protections to individuals in “protected status.”

In summary, as workplace bullying becomes increasingly documented and reported, today’s HR practitioners are equipped with more information and statistics about this practice, which include:
• Workplace bullying has many similarities to school bullying and domestic violence.
• Bullied employees have no “protected status” unless they are minorities or disabled (thus belonging to a protected category as defined by law).
• Bullying creates a “pressure cooker” environment that has resulted in workplace violence and related incidents.
• The label of being a “disgruntled employee” or “wimp” prevents targets of bullying from being taken seriously.
• Up to 80% of workplace bullying is done by bosses, thus limiting the availability of complaint avenues for the victimized employees.

PROFILES OF WORKPLACE BULLIES

With workplace bullying becoming an epidemic, it is important to identify potential bullies. According to Margaret Kohut, an author and social worker, bullies often exhibit the following characteristics and behaviors:

• They have great difficulties in interpersonal relationships.
  Bullies often ignore requests from others, deadlines come and go, simple differences of opinion erupt into major arguments and minor errors become mind-numbing crucial mistakes.
• They are “ego syntonic”.
  Bullies see their pathology as a virtue and strength, rather than as seriously damaging to others in the workplace.
• They lack empathy toward others.
  Bullies often do not understand or care that they are harming others. They view their hurtful actions as “right,” and if their superior, coworker or subordinate is distressed by their actions, that is his or her problem; they are “too sensitive” in the eyes of the bully.
• They have difficulty maintaining boundaries.
  Bullies often cannot maintain the interpersonal boundaries expected in the workplace. It is not uncommon for them to divulge extenuating personal circumstances, excuses, or other personal baggage to coworkers. For example, bullies often complain extensively to others about their personal lives and issues that are bothering them.
• They possess rigid and irrational belief patterns.
  Bullies often have unshakable and nonsensical beliefs such as “I am a failure if my subordinate makes a mistake, so I have to micromanage him,” or “Everyone is picking on me,” or “Only other talented and gifted people understand me.”
• They tend to have hidden agendas.
  Bullies often follow their own scripts while appearing to tout the organization’s goals. This is especially prevalent when the organization’s agenda is not also his/her agenda.
• **They lack emotional intelligence.**
  Bullies do not understand how to respond to their social surroundings; they cannot relate to others on an emotional level or solve conflicts or problems without becoming adversarial. They are incapable of disagreeing without being disagreeable.

• **They are “one-trick ponies.”**
  Bullies know how to do only one thing, and they do it well to the exclusion of other tasks or abilities. They have an inflexible pattern of how things should be done, and woe to the boss, coworker, or subordinate who deviates from this pattern.

In other words, bullies are workplace manipulators with a negative agenda. Their primary goal is to control the people they target. To do this, they engage in a variety of tactics, which are designed to shame, humiliate and treat the target like a powerless person. They see targets as powerless and this distorted thinking is the bully’s way of surviving at someone else’s expense.

**HOW BULLYING OCCURS AT THE WORKPLACE**

Having a basic understanding of the textbook definition of workplace bullying brings us to the next question: How does workplace bullying actually occur? The answer is: “It depends.”

Workplace bullying occurs in a variety of ways, ranging from subtle (passive aggressive) behavior to more extreme physical (violent) behavior. A bully often exudes self-importance to the victim, condescends or patronizes him/her, withholds necessary information about tasks, arbitrarily changes work deadlines, bombards him/her with memos, emails and phone calls about petty matters, denies him/her needed training and refuses to grant routine time off, habitually does fails to return calls or answer emails, interrupts his/her work, blames others for “errors,” makes insults of put-downs, yells and screams at the victim, steals credit, and makes unflattering (and often untrue) comments to others about the victim’s work performance. In any case, the bully’s behavior is expected to grow bolder over time.

In the case of a supervisor/manager bully, he/she also focus his emphasis on minor flaws in the victim’s work, but never recognizes good productivity and the overall value of the employee to the organization. The supervisor/manager may also offer backhanded compliments when evaluating an employee’s work, such as “Thanks for going to the Print Shop to copy these reports, but they are unsatisfactory and need to be reworked.” The supervisor/manager then points out minor flaws that do not warrant a “rework” causing the victimized individual to think that he/she is solely responsible for failing.

The WBI survey categorized bullying into five different categories. Of those categories, 53% involved verbal abuse, 53% involved threats, intimidation or humiliation, 45% involved interference with performance, 47% involved abuse of authority, and 30% involved destruction of relationships.
Often, targets of workplace bullying do not report bullying activities. They stay “under the radar” for a long time. The WBI Survey revealed that 73% of the targets endured bullying for more than six months, while 44% for more than a year. These statistics are particularly alarming as they represent the time these targets suffered from bullying. It can be presumed that of those bullying activities lasting more than a year, many either went unreported or management failed to take action to stop it.

**PROFILES OF WORKPLACE VICTIMS**

In statistics released by WBI, 80% of bullying targets are women, 82% of targets ultimately lose their jobs, and 98% of bullying is witnessed or known by other employees. These statistics clearly demonstrate that HR professionals must take action.

In some instances, however, a target may not realize that he/she is being bullied by a boss, coworker or subordinate. Targeted employees may sense something is horribly wrong but may ascribe their misery to incompetence, blaming themselves, and not the perpetrator, for the misery. This tendency to absorb the bully’s treatment then blame themselves for being bullied is a primary characteristic of targets.

As a result, bullies often seek out targets that are vulnerable for a various reasons, such as age, gender, degree of skill, personality characteristics, the degree of the bully’s own feelings or inadequacy, the relative positions in the workplace of the target and the bully, and the bully’s ability to avoid being caught and punished.

In order to fully understand why bullies bully, it is also important to understand the profiles of victims. Below are behaviors that indicate person’s likelihood of being bullied if one or more of the following conditions apply:

- The victim’s manager consistently imposes arbitrary verbal and written warnings and/or disciplinary procedures that are unjustified, without reason, and directed solely towards the victim.
- The victim’s positive contributions to the workplace are not acknowledged.
- The victim’s attempts at initiative and independent thinking are vigorously discouraged.
- Minor flaws and imperfections in the victim’s work performance are magnified out of proportion, and repeatedly thrown up to the victim. The past is also the present.
- The victim is good at his/her job, and thereby a threat to his/her coworkers or manager.
- The victim is required more and more often to justify his/her decisions and actions. The timeliness of his/her work suffers because of this and the victim is then chastised for failing to meet deadlines. This is also known as the “Gotcha!” tactic.
- The victim feels his/her autonomy is declining because his manager constantly micromanages him.
- The victim is liked and respected by his/her colleagues, but not the bully.
• The victim is older than the bully and has more job experience.
• The victim is considerably younger than the bully and is assumed to be unskilled and incompetent because of his/her youth.
• The victim is capable of self-motivation and institution, needing little management.
• The victim does not participate in office politics.

So why are targets victimized by workplace bullies? While there is no simple answer, the WBI conducted a research in 2003 to identify top reasons bullied individuals gave for being bullied:\textsuperscript{xii}:

• The target refused to be subservient or over-controlled.
• The bully envies the target’s superior competence and technical skill; a majority of targets reported have an undergraduate degree or higher.
• The bully envies the target’s social skills, being liked and positive attitude.
• The target is ethnical, honest; a whistle-blower type employee.

HOW TO ADDRESS WORKPLACE BULLYING

To evaluate how employers respond to workplace bullying complaints, WSI conducted a national online survey in 2008 on Employer and Co-Worker Responses to Bullying:\textsuperscript{xiii}. The results are summarized below:

• 1.7% of employers conducted a fair investigation and protected the target from further bullying with negative consequences for the bully.
• 6.2% of employers conducted a fair investigation with negative consequences for the bully but no safety for the target.
• 8.7% of employers conducted an inadequate or unfair investigation with no consequences for the bully or target.
• 31% of employers conducted an inadequate or unfair investigation with no consequences for the bully while the target was retaliated against.
• 12.8% of employers did nothing or ignored the complaint, with no consequences for the bully or target.
• 15.7% of employers did nothing; the target was retaliated against for reporting the bullying but kept his/her job.
• 24% of employers did nothing; the target was retaliated against and eventually lost his/her job.

As clearly indicated above, a predominant percentage (53%) of employers did nothing. Furthermore, in 71% of the cases the employers actually retaliated against the target who had the courage to report it. This inevitably sends a clear message to the bullies that they can get away with it. Over time, bullying becomes part of the employer’s culture as “the way things are done around here.”
While some countries, such as Sweden, and places like Quebec and Saskatchewan have implemented some form of anti-bullying workplace legislation, the United States has done little in the form of anti-bullying laws. Furthermore, there are currently no specific national standards for workplace violence. Therefore, employers in the United States often lack policies for preventing or dealing with workplace aggression.

However, Section 5(a)(1) of the OSH Act, often referred to as the General Duty Clause, requires employers to —

“furnish to each of his employees employment and a place of employment which are free from recognized hazards that are causing or are likely to cause death or serious physical harm to his employees”

The American Institute of Stress reported that each week, on average, 20 workers are murdered in the U. S., making homicide the second highest cause of workplace deaths. 18,000 non-fatal violent crimes such as sexual and other assaults also occur each week while the victim is working, or about a million a year. In fact, the figures are probably higher since many are not reported. "Desk rage" and "phone rage" have also become increasingly common terms. Therefore, it is important for employers to identify bullying behavior early on so that workplace violence can be prevented.

The following recommendations are designed to remedy this situation and increase awareness:

• **Create and implement a Zero-Tolerance Policy.**
  Adding workplace bullying clauses to existing policies enables HR professionals to discipline perpetrators and terminate them in the event of workplace violence. It further condemns bullying as unacceptable and warns perpetrator that he/she will be punished for such behavior. Employees should be encouraged to speak confidentially to an HR professional about suspected and potential workplace violence behavior. All employees should be annually briefed on the warning signs of workplace violence. In addition, all new hires should be orientated to ensure full understanding of this Zero-Tolerance Policy so they are aware of the organization’s expectations.

• **Provide training for employees to deal with a workplace bully.**
  Civil rights attorneys Shapiro and Jankowski recommended an innovative approach for employees to stay on the job with a workplace bully. The N.I.C.E. System assists employees in coping with difficult people without becoming one of them. The N.I.C.E. System consists of useful bully-busting methods targets can employ while maintaining their civility and composure. N.I.C.E. stands for neutralize emotions, identify type, control the encounter, and explore options.

Furthermore, Kurt Ronn, president and founder of recruitment firm HR Works recommended that HR professionals provide sensitivity and performance-management training on an ongoing basis.
Dr. Julie Olson-Buchanan, a Management Professor from California State University, Fresno, recommends that managers be trained to prevent bullying by:

- Applying policies and procedures consistently and without bias,
- Using interpersonal and conflict resolution skills to resolve differences;
- Serving as role models for how colleagues should treat one another;
- Being knowledgeable about the resources available within and outside the organization:
- Anticipating “hot issues;
- Heading off potential problems before they arise,;
- Responding to issues in a timely and appropriate manner: and
- Working to foster a civil work environment

- Create and implementing the “No Asshole Rule”.
  In his book *The No Asshole Rule* author Dr. Robert Sutton highlighted the stories of workplaces that do not tolerate bullying. An example is a California HR company which requires every new hire to agree to 12 rules of workplace behavior, including the “no asshole” rule.

- Create and maintain comprehensive stress management training.
  Effort should be devoted to defining the purpose of a Stress Management program, delineating organization and individual goals, acquiring organization support, and integrating the program with existing occupation safety and health efforts. This lays a foundation for a more stable and holistic program for controlling organizational stress.

- Develop recruitment and selection systems to help prevent mistreatment.
  Companies such as Shell Oil, Halliburton and Lockheed Martin emphasize interpersonal treatment (ex: respect) as core organizational values in their recruiting materials. The core values then become part of their selection criteria and the companies develop selection materials based on it. These companies use methods such as behavior interviewing, reference checks, assessment centers, and integrity testing to help screen out problem employees. However, organizations should be cautioned that some of these selection methods may need more scrutiny to ensure compliance with merit system or civil service rules.

- Negotiate and include language in Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBA) to define bullying.
  By negotiating and including language in the CBA to define bullying, employers in unionized environment can avoid disagreements or union interference in the disciplinary process involving bullying behavior.

- Provide training in conflict resolution and mediation.
  Workplace mediation is becoming an increasingly popular dispute resolution method to settle employee conflicts including harassment and bullying.
complaints. There is a direct correlation between the quality of relationships across the workplace and long-term effectiveness and success. Mediation can be used to address complex relationship difficulties so that positive working relationships can be restored.

Of course, these strategies cannot completely eliminate workplace bullying. It ultimately depends on the organization to promote, enforce, and build a culture of non-tolerance of bullying. Creating and maintaining a zero-tolerance policy must involve the concerted efforts of every employee in the organization regardless of job or position. It takes the effort of an entire organization to permanently eradicate this practice.

In the event of an individual’s non-compliance with the organization’s policy, a proper investigation is necessary and appropriate disciplinary action should be taken to address the individual’s behavior. Disciplinary actions may include a verbal warning, written warning, training, suspension, last chance agreement, and termination. In the event of serious offenses such as violence or threats of violence against others, the HR professional should consider bypassing the less stringent steps in progressive discipline. In organizations where the progressive disciplinary process is dictated by the CBA, it may be necessary to contact the union about the seriousness of the situation to justify deviating from the negotiated procedure.

As in all cases of discipline, HR professionals should apply disciplinary action consistently and fairly across employees, clearly explain and identify the inappropriate behavior, provide the employee with resources (ex: sensitivity training, Employee Assistance Program, anger management program, etc.) to address problem behavior, carefully document the process and results, and follow-up to clarify expectations and ensure that the behavior has changed. Human Resources should also ensure it has clearly communicated to the victim that action has been taken to prevent similar instances from recurring, and to provide the victim with means to report future instances. Furthermore, Human Resources should ensure that no retaliatory acts take place involving the victim and managers are aware of the organization’s policy concerning retaliations.

By following these steps, an organization can properly investigate and handle complaints in a fair and prompt manner. In situations where litigation is anticipated, legal counsel should be involved early on in the process.

**BEST PRACTICE: COACHELLA VALLEY SCHOOL DISTRICT EXAMPLE**

As a part of my research, I looked for a California public agency that had adopted an anti-workplace bullying program. Although I anticipated finding an abundance of examples, in fact, agencies with anti-bullying programs were scarce. The Coachella Valley Unified School District is only the second in the nation to hire a consultant to help create an anti-workplace bullying program. In an interview, district officials stated that eliminating bullying behavior would not only make the district a better place to work, but would set a better example for students. While it is common among school districts to adopt anti-bullying policy for students, Coachella Valley is one of the few that also implemented a program for all employees. Implementing the
As part of initial implementation, the school district hired the Workplace Bullying Institute to train an anti-bullying team and create a policy at the district. The 20-person team went through three days of training to become local experts on workplace bullying. The team consisted of supervisors and employees from all areas within the district. The anti-bullying team also created a formal board policy defining workplace bullying – what it is and what it is not – and outlining consequences for offenders. This team will also work with people who feel they are being bullied and reach out to the bully if claims are substantiated.

According to the new policy, if the first informational and resolution-oriented meeting does not end the problem, a second complaint is referred to Human Resources for discipline. The policy aims to create a culture where bullying is not tolerated.

The Coachella Valley Federation of Teachers and the Classified School Employees Association both approved the program. Both unions agreed that the benefits of reducing bullying outweigh the costs of the program.

Although the tangible cost is difficult to quantify, school district officials believe the program will lead to a healthy, productive and happy workforce.

CONCLUSION

The success of every organization ultimately depends on its people. As HR professionals, our role is to promote a happy and productive workforce that contributes to a smooth-running organization. As discussed this paper, workplace bullying can have devastating effects on employees and productivity. In labor relations, it is especially important to ensure that each incident of workplace bullying is properly investigated, documented, and appropriate action taken to correct the perpetrator’s behavior. Furthermore, management should communicate with the victim to assure him/her that measures have been taken to prevent future incidents.

My hope is that this paper raises awareness of workplace bullying, a silent epidemic in the American workforce. Until legislation prohibits workplace bullying employers must think creatively to promote non-tolerance and act quickly when issues arise. Supervisors and managers must be able to recognize bullying behavior and refer matters to management and human resources. While it is virtually impossible to eliminate bullying completely, the incidence of mistreatment can be minimized through the implementation of human resource practices in selection, training, discipline, and development, which will result in improving overall morale and contribute to building a more productive workforce.

PRESENTED BY:
Christopher Ko, Human Resources Analyst
Central Contra Costa Sanitary District
5019 Imhoff Place, Martinez, CA 94553
Email: cko@centralsan.org
References