

Running of the bullies Tamplng workplace morale and productivity Offenders can spread ill will from the top down

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Shaken up and stressed out, workplaces are increasingly susceptible to bullying and browbeating behavior.

But instead of being shrugged off, mean-spirited antics are getting new attention as a serious affliction undermining productivity and morale. Researchers are studying it.

Employers are trying to stop it. Lawsuits are being filed by workers who say they've survived it.

"Corporate bullies are like termites that eat away at a company's foundation," says Jeffrey Caponigro, author of *The Crisis Counselor*, on managing crises in the workplace.

"It becomes part of the culture, something that's normal in the workplace. It's abuse that should not be allowed."

In July, the International Labour Organization, in a worldwide survey of workplace violence, called psychological harassment on the job a growing problem in the USA. And a study by Minneapolis-based Relia Star Financial found workers were three times more likely to experience such harassment than to be threatened with physical harm. Victims reported lowered productivity and higher rates of psychological distress, including fear and depression.

Skeptics dismiss much of the hubbub as whining, but researchers point out that bullying does not consist of little incivilities. These are not rude slips done more out of ignorance than spite.

Bullying is personal.

Bullying is not only the venom-spewing boss who openly belittles subordinates. Bullying is the gaggle of workers who go to lunch and snub one of their own; the saboteur who undermines another's successes; the employees who engage in silent treatment and spread nettlesome rumors.

"The cruelty is incredible," says Gary Namie at *The Work Doctor*, a Benicia, Calif.-based employee advocacy firm. "People think bullying is jumping up and screaming. It's usually much more subtle."

It goes by many names: emotional abuse, personal harassment, psychological aggression. "This is a significant problem in the workplace," says Loreleigh Keashly, a social psychologist at Wayne State University in Detroit. "The behaviors look childish, but

they're done by adults. The people who experience it really suffer."

Rising tensions

Researchers believe the pain is more acute today. Blame it on a time of tumultuous corporate change, fraught with job cutbacks, new technology and pressures to do more with less. An uptick in the pace of corporate change, studies show, can also trigger a rise in bullying behavior.

A 1998 survey of more than 400 employees found certain work changes, such as restructuring or layoffs, were significantly related to verbal aggression, says Joel Neuman, a State University of New York associate management professor who worked on the report.

Other studies also have shown some gender differences, he says.

"All the literature suggests men engage in more physical behavior while women engage in more verbal techniques, like ostracism," Neuman says. "A lot of these behaviors hurt when they happen and have a cumulative effect."

And some who claim they have endured such hostilities say it's the cumulative effects that hurt most.

Robin Franco says she was forced from her bus-driving job in 1996 because of a boss she contends belittled her in front of others, spread false stories and generally made work unbearable.

"It tears down your dignity and self-respect," says Franco, 41, of Pinckney, Mich. "It started with little intimidations and got bigger. I started to think 'Am I a worthwhile person?' I went from a woman who is self-assured to being terrified of leaving home." But her former employer, Laidlaw Transit, says four parties investigated Franco's claims and found they had no merit. "We take these allegations very seriously. We have a zero-tolerance policy for this type of thing," says Dale Moser at Laidlaw. But Franco did what more workers who believe they've been bullied are trying: She filed a hostile-work-environment lawsuit, a case that's still pending.

Setting policies

The growth in workers' compensation claims and lawsuits alleging emotional distress is putting more employers on the defensive.

"If the employer didn't do anything about it and knew about the bullying, then the employer might be liable for recklessness," says Michael Karpeles, a Chicago employment lawyer.

As a result, employers are less likely to longer dismiss bullying as a socially acceptable side effect of office politics. Instead, many are passing policies that say no harassment -- including verbal abuse -- will be allowed.

"We try to emphasize straight talk and openness, but not bullying," says Burke Stinson at AT&T. "Griping is a natural phenomenon, but bullying can be a sign of weak character."

It really does more harm than good."

American Express, Burger King and J.C. Penney are among the firms that ban all harassment -- including verbal -- on the job.

American Express' policy, put in place in 1996, also bans behavior offensive to groups or people. The Oregon Department of Transportation adopted a policy in June that prohibits bullying actions such as "loud, angry outbursts or obscenities."

And 7-Eleven has sent store personnel through training programs that touch on how to treat others.

Some employees say cracking down isn't a bad idea.

"You've got to nip it in the bud," says Chris Corbitt of St. Joseph, Mich., who works at a printing company. "Businesses have become more professional. Unless it's coming from the very top, it's not going to be tolerated."

Need thicker hides?

But the policies and legal filings also have raised some questions: Are we being too thin-skinned?

In some cases, experts say, that answer is yes.

"My mother always said 'Don't be such a baby.' So many people get to a point where everything is extreme," says Dianne Blomberg, a workplace relationship expert at Metropolitan State College of Denver. "A lot of it is just life. Toughen up."

But Blomberg and others do add one caveat: Action does need to be taken, they say, in cases where bullying is so extreme it becomes emotionally crippling.

The tricky issue is what to do, because no employer can mandate friendship.

Workplace experts suggest myriad approaches. Employers should be more careful about whom they hire, they say.

Bullied targets should try to confront aggressors instead of sacrificing their self-esteem, they say. And managers must deal with the issues driving the behavior -- doing more than just telling a bully to knock it off.

"Otherwise they put a Band-Aid over it and the guy's still bleeding," says Linda Talley, author of *Business Finesse: Dealing with Sticky Situations in the Workplace for Managers*.

"If you have a 'rage-a-holic' in the office, most managers are frightened. They don't know how to deal with it."

Handling problems can be harder when the bully is a boss, experts say. Sometimes the only recourse is getting out.

Even employees who do bring lawsuits have a Herculean task ahead of them, because chances of winning are about as good as reforming a die-hard bully's behavior.

"To have a decent chance of success, it has to be tied to some type of discrimination or sexual harassment," says David Yamada, associate law professor at Suffolk University Law

School in Boston. "Jerks at work tend to be kept on the job."

Some workers who say they've faced bullying at work turned to friends, family, even their church for solace. Others try to file grievances or look for new jobs.

"It makes me think, 'What did I do wrong?' " says Linda McNamee of Hagerstown, Md., who says she suffered from on-the-job emotional abuse that included the silent treatment. "It's pretty demeaning. How can you do your job and do it successfully if you're not wanted there?"

[Illustration]

GRAPHIC, Color, By Sam Ward, USA TODAY

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