

Workplace Bullying: What Everyone Needs to Know

August 2006
Report # 87-1-2006

WHAT IS WORKPLACE BULLYING AND WHO IS AFFECTED?

Workplace bullying refers to *repeated*, unreasonable actions of individuals (or a group) directed towards an employee (or a group of employees), which is intended to intimidate and creates a risk to the health and safety of the employee(s).

Workplace bullying often involves an abuse or misuse of power. Bullying includes behavior that intimidates, degrades, offends, or humiliates a worker, often in front of others. Bullying behavior creates feelings of defenselessness in the target and undermines an individual's right to dignity at work.

Bullying is different from aggression. Whereas aggression may involve a single act, bullying involves repeated attacks against the target, creating an *on-going pattern* of behavior. "Tough" or "demanding" bosses are not necessarily bullies, as long as their primary motivation is to obtain the best performance by setting high expectations.



Many bullying situations involve employees bullying their peers, rather than a supervisor bullying an employee.

One study from the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) found that a quarter of the 516 private and public companies studied reported some occurrence of bullying in the preceding year.

Examples of bullying:

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

WHAT IS CORPORATE/INSTITUTIONAL BULLYING?

Corporate/institutional bullying occurs when bullying is entrenched in an organization and becomes accepted as part of the workplace culture.

Corporate/institutional bullying can manifest itself in different ways:

- Placing unreasonable expectations on employees, where failure to meet those expectations means making life unpleasant (or dismissing) anyone who objects;
- Dismissing employees suffering from stress as “weak” while completely ignoring or denying potential work-related causes of the stress; and/or
- Encouraging employees to fabricate complaints about colleagues with promises of promotion or threats of discipline.

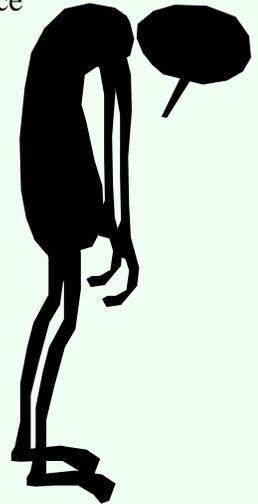


- Workforce characteristics (e.g., age, gender, parental status, apprentice or trainee);
- Workplace relationships (e.g., inadequate information flow between organizational levels, lack of employee participation in decisions; and
- Work systems (e.g., lack of policies about behavior, high rate and intensity of work, staff shortages, interpersonal conflict, organizational constraints, role ambiguity, and role conflict.

HOW BULLYING AFFECTS PEOPLE:

Victims of bullying experience significant physical and mental health problems:

- High stress; post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Financial problems due to absence
- Reduced self-esteem
- Musculoskeletal problems
- Phobias
- Sleep disturbances
- Increased depression/self-blame
- Digestive problems



Signs of corporate and institutional bullying include:

- Failure to meet organizational goals;
- Increased frequencies of grievances, resignations, and requests for transfers;
- Increased absence due to sickness; and
- Increased disciplinary actions.

If you are aware of bullying in the workplace and do not take action, then you are accepting a share of the responsibility for any future abuses. This means that witnesses of bullying behavior should be encouraged to report any such incidences. Individuals are less likely to engage in antisocial behavior when it is understood that the organization does not tolerate such behavior and that the perpetrator is likely to be punished.

Factors that Increase the Risk for Bullying Behavior:

- Significant organizational change (i.e., major internal restructuring, technological change);

HOW BULLYING AFFECTS ORGANIZATIONS:

Each of the individual consequences listed above can be very costly for the organization. Costs of bullying generally fall into three categories:

1. Replacing staff members that leave as a result of being bullied
2. Work effort being displaced as staff cope with bullying incidents (i.e., effort being directed away from work productivity and towards coping)

3. Costs associated with investigations of ill treatment and potential legal action

Bullies do not run good organizations; staff turnover and sick leave will be high while morale and productivity will be low. Stress, depression and physical health problems result in time away from work that is costly in terms of workers' compensation and lost productivity.

The health problems experienced by victims of bullying result in a sense of helplessness and negative emotional states among employee(s). Low self-esteem and a negative organizational climate suppress creativity and hamper employees' abilities to respond to difficult situations or challenging goals.

The breakdown of trust in a bullying environment may mean that employees will fail to contribute their best work, do not give extra ideas for improvement, do not provide feedback on failures and may be less honest about performance.

BULLYING IS DIFFERENT FROM HARASSMENT

Harassment is defined as differential treatment because of age, sex, race, religion, national origin, or disability. If you believe that you are being harassed for one of the above reasons, you should immediately contact the Washington State Human Rights Commission (1-800-233-3247, <http://www.hum.wa.gov>).

Bullying, on the other hand, is often directed at someone a bully feels threatened by. The target often doesn't even realize when they are being

bullied because the behavior is covert, through trivial criticisms and isolating actions that occur behind closed doors. While harassment is illegal; bullying is not.

WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT BULLYING?

Bullying in general is NOT illegal in the U.S. unless it involves harassment based on sex, race, age, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. However, here is what you can do:

Employees:

Regain control by:

- Recognizing that you are being bullied;
- Realizing that you are NOT the source of the problem; and
- Recognizing that bullying is about control, and therefore has nothing to do with your performance.

Take action by:

- Keeping a diary detailing the nature of the bullying (e.g., dates, times, places, what was said or done and who was present); and
- Obtaining copies of harassing / bullying paper trails; hold onto copies of documents that contradict the bully's accusations against you (e.g., time sheets, audit reports, etc.).

Other actions:

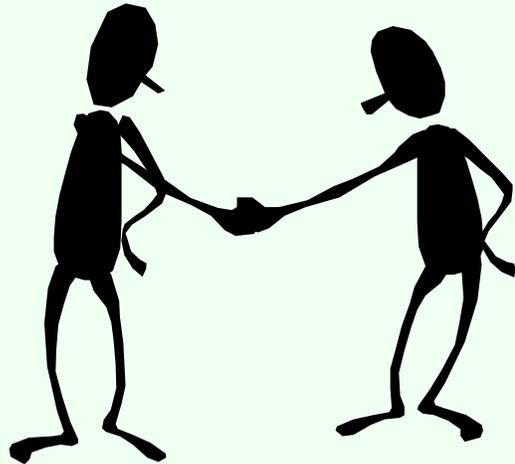
- Expect the bully to deny and perhaps misconstrue your accusations; have a witness with you during any meetings with the bully; report the behavior to an appropriate person.
- Contact the Washington State Employee Assistance Program, (<http://www.dop.wa.gov/Employees/EmployeeAssistanceProgram/>) for guidance on dealing with the issue.



Employers:

- Create a zero tolerance anti-bullying policy. This policy should be part of the wider commitment to a safe and healthful working environment and should involve the appropriate Human Resources representative;
- When witnessed or reported, the bullying behavior should be addressed IMMEDIATELY;
- If bullying is entrenched in the organization, complaints need to be taken seriously and investigated promptly. Reassignment of those involved may be necessary (with an “innocent until proven guilty” approach);
- Structure the work environment to incorporate a sense of autonomy, individual challenge/mastery, and clarity of task expectations for employees – Include employees in decision-making processes;
- Hold awareness campaigns for EVERYONE on what bullying is. Encourage reporting;
- Ensure management has an active part in the staff they supervise, rather than being far removed from them;
- Encourage open door policies;
- Investigate the extent and nature of the problem. Conduct attitude surveys;
- Improve management’s ability and sensitivity towards dealing with and responding to conflicts;
- Establish an independent contact for employees (e.g., HR contact); and
- Have a demonstrated commitment “from the top” about what is and is not acceptable behavior.

See the example [Workplace Bullying Policy](#) at the end of this document.



OTHER RESOURCES & CONTACTS:

The Washington State Employee Assistance Program (<http://www.dop.wa.gov/Employees/EmployeeAssistanceProgram/>) has representatives that are available to help with personal or work-related problems that may be impacting your work performance. EAP services are confidential, voluntary, free of charge, and accessible. Representatives in the Olympia area can be reached by phone at 360-753-3260.

The Australian government has put together a publication on “Advice to Supervisors on Bullying in the Workplace” that includes useful resources for employers, including a checklist to assess whether you have a bully-free workplace. Use this checklist to see whether you are being bullied or have a bullying workplace: <http://www.defence.gov.au/equity/issues/AdviceonBullying.doc>

REFERENCES:

The following websites/organizations have put together valuable information that includes definitions and facts about bullying in the workplace:

- UK National Workplace Bullying Advice Line (<http://www.bullyonline.org/workbully/bully.htm>)
- European Agency for Safety and Health at Work Facts: Bullying at Work (http://agency.osha.eu.int/publications/factsheets/23/factsheetsn23_en.pdf)
- The Commission of Occupational Safety and Health (http://www.worksafe.wa.gov.au/newsite/worksafe/media/Guide_bullying_emplo.pdf)
- NIOSH Update: Most Workplace Bullying is Worker to Worker (<http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/updates/upd-07-28-04.html>)
- Workplace Bullying and Trauma Institute, Bellingham, Washington (<http://www.bullyinginstitute.org/>)
- Guide for Employers on Workplace Bullying (http://www.worksafe.wa.gov.au/newsite/worksafe/media/Guide_bullying_emplo.pdf)
- Guide for Employees on Workplace Bullying (http://www.worksafe.wa.gov.au/newsite/worksafe/media/Guide_bullying_employ.pdf)

Research References:

- Glendinnig, P.M. (2001). Workplace bullying: Curing the cancer of the American workplace. *Public Personnel Management*, Vol. 30, pp. 269-285.
- Spector, P. E., & Fox, S. (2005). Stressor-emotion model. In S. Fox and P. E. Spector (Eds.) *Counterproductive Work Behavior: Investigations of Actors and Targets* (pp. 151-174), American Psychological Association: Washington, DC.

- Keashly, L., & Harvey, S. (2005). Emotional Abuse in the Workplace. In S. Fox and P. E. Spector (Eds.) *Counterproductive Work Behavior: Investigations of Actors and Targets* (pp. 201-235), American Psychological Association: Washington, DC.
- Raynor, C., & Keashly, L. (2005). Bullying at work: A perspective from Britain and North America. In S. Fox and P. E. Spector (Eds.) *Counterproductive Work Behavior: Investigations of Actors and Targets* (pp. 271-296), American Psychological Association: Washington, DC.
- Salin, D. (2003). Way of explaining workplace bullying: A review of enabling, motivating, and precipitating structures and processes in the work environment. *Human Relations*, Vol. 56, pp. 1213-1232.

SHARP – Promoting Safer, Healthier Workplaces

This report was produced by the Safety & Health Assessment and Research for Prevention (SHARP) Program – An independent research program within the Washington State Department of Labor & Industries. SHARP’s researchers and scientists partner with business and labor to identify industry-wide hazards and then develop sensible, effective solutions to eliminate those hazards.

If you have questions about this report, the SHARP program, or require assistance, please contact us at:

SHARP
Washington State Department of Labor & Industries
PO Box 44330
Olympia, WA 98504-4330
Tel. (888) 66-SHARP (toll-free)
Fax (360) 902-5672
Email SHARP@LNI.wa.gov

Check out our website at:
www.LNI.wa.gov/Safety/Research

EXAMPLE WORKPLACE BULLYING POLICY

Company X considers workplace bullying unacceptable and will not tolerate it under any circumstances.

Workplace bullying is behavior that harms, intimidates, offends, degrades or humiliates an employee, possibly in front of other employees, clients, or customers. Workplace bullying may cause the loss of trained and talented employees, reduce productivity and morale and create legal risks.

Company X believes all employees should be able to work in an environment free of bullying. Managers and supervisors must ensure employees are not bullied.

Company X has grievance and investigation procedures to deal with workplace bullying. Any reports of workplace bullying will be treated seriously and investigated promptly, confidentially and impartially.

Company X encourages all employees to report workplace bullying. Managers and supervisors must ensure employees who make complaints, or witnesses, are not victimized.

Disciplinary action will be taken against anyone who bullies a co-employee. Discipline may involve a warning, transfer, counseling, demotion or dismissal, depending on the circumstances.

The contact person for bullying at this workplace is:

Name: _____

Phone Number: _____

Adapted from The Commission of Occupational Safety and Health, Government of Western Australia

(http://www.worksafe.wa.gov.au/newsite/worksafe/media/Guide_bullying_emplo.pdf)