

## Bullying in the Workplace

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Bullying can happen at any stage of life and in almost any circumstance. Bullying is different from aggression, which may involve a single act. Bullying is a persistent pattern of mistreatment that causes emotional, cognitive distress, and/or physical harm. Bullying can include verbal, nonverbal, psychological, physical abuse and humiliation. Individuals who engage in bullying behavior may abuse or misuse power and operate within the framework of the workplace, school, or community. A bully's behavior is often more nuanced and not immediately obvious to those who are in positions of authority and those who are not targets of the bully. When others become aware that bullying is occurring, they may choose to do nothing because they are not directly affected, they may be afraid and not interested in drawing the attention of the bully or they may lack the power or influence to stop the behavior. This can be particularly hurtful, as Martin Luther King Jr. said, "In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends."

Some bullying situations involve students, community members or employees bullying their peers, while others involve those in positions of real or perceived authority who bully those with less status. Another form of bullying is mobbing, or "ganging up". The term mobbing refers to a group of people targeting a particular individual. Those in leadership positions should intervene immediately to address and stop mobbing behaviors.

There is a difference between tough, demanding leaders or bosses who are respectful and fair and those who bully. Demanding bosses who are both respectful and fair are motivated to obtain the best performance or outcomes by setting high, yet reasonable expectations. This does not necessarily mean they are bullies.

### Examples of Bullying

- Giving unsolicited criticism
- Blaming without justification
- Singling someone out for negative treatment (i.e. Being sworn at or shouted at, excluded or isolated socially)
- Excessive monitoring or micromanaging
- Giving work with unrealistic deadlines
- Purposely humiliating or embarrassing someone

Bullying may be directed at someone by whom the bully feels threatened. Sometimes the target doesn't realize when he or she is being bullied, because the behavior may be covert, such as trivial criticisms and isolating actions that occur behind closed doors.

When known, bullying behavior creates feelings of helplessness and injustice in the target and undermines an individual's right to dignity, security and confidence at work, in school or in their community.

Victims of bullying may experience significant physical and mental health problems. Victims of bullying often experience a variety of health problems because of an increasing sense of helplessness and negative emotional states. Low self-esteem and a negative organizational climate suppress creativity and hamper people's abilities to respond to difficult situations or challenging goals. Common symptoms associated with bullying include, but are not limited to:

- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Excessive absence leading to financial problems and jeopardizing employment
- High stress
  - Bodily aches and pains, related to the stress
  - Sleep disturbance, trouble falling asleep or staying asleep
  - Weight gain or loss, change in eating habits
- Phobias
- Depression and self-blame
- Family tension and stress
- Reduced self-esteem

What you permit, you promote! If you are aware of bullying in the in your community, workplace, or school and do not take action, then you are accepting a share of the responsibility for any future abuses.

### What can be done about bullying?

Although bullying is not illegal, (distinguished from harassment) there are things you can do to curtail or diminish the level of bullying experienced in your organization.

Organizations should create a stance that has zero tolerance for bullying and establish an anti-bullying policy. This policy, endorsed and championed by those in leadership, should be viewed as one element of an overall commitment to a healthy, safe and productive environment. Organizations should conduct on-going awareness campaigns regarding bullying, what it looks like, what it sounds like, and how it hurts people, organizations and reputations. Establish a clear and widely communicated process through which bullying behavior is addressed. Those who might be tempted to bully may be less likely to engage in problem behavior when it is clear that the organization doesn't tolerate the behavior and that consequences exist for those who ignore the prohibition. This is not a "one and done" project, and will require an ongoing awareness effort. A norm should be established that requires when bullying behavior is experienced or witnessed, that there is an immediate response. Allegations of bullying should be taken seriously and investigated. Individuals who are repeatedly

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involved in conflicts or who are identified as bullies can be counseled about the impact of their words and deeds on their colleagues and teams. In some cases, those individuals may be appropriately referred to that organization's assistance program. Train those in leadership to identify and respond to bullying behavior. Often those in leadership positions may be aware of a problem but they are not confident that, if they address the problem, they will have the necessary support. They may simply not know the words to use or have the experience to address the issue. Extra

training and an open-door policy can make addressing the concern less daunting.

If you come to believe that you are the target of a bully, first recognize and accept that this behavior is unacceptable and that when someone chooses to behave this way, you are not at fault. Bullying is often about control. Keep track, use a spiral-bound notebook or a computer journaling program to record the bullying behavior. Note the dates, times, places, what was said or done, and who witnessed the conduct. Create a paper trail by making copies of

harassing or bullying emails, signs or paper correspondence. Keep records that demonstrate that accusations made against you are untrue or inaccurate. Don't be surprised if the bully is either surprised by, or denies your accusations. Sometimes, as hard as it is to believe, bullies don't realize how their words or deeds affect others. Have a witness during any meetings with the bully. Always report inappropriate or unacceptable behavior to an appropriate person. This problem will not go away if ignored.

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The Employee/Member Assistance Program can support you with whatever challenges you're facing. We can help you or your family members get into counseling as well. Call us at (800) 292-2780.

### Distinguishing Harassment from Bullying

*Harassment* is a type of illegal discrimination that is exemplified by unwelcome conduct that is often offensive and serious enough to adversely affect a person's employment. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) says that when the unwelcome behavior is based upon the targeted person's protected class and creates a work environment that is "intimidating, hostile, or offensive to reasonable people," then it meets the definition of *harassment*. Protected classes in employment are race

or color; religion; national origin; sex; marital status; disability; HIV, AIDS, or Hepatitis C status; sexual orientation or gender identity; and honorably discharged veteran and military status.

An example of harassment could be when an employee tells racist or sexually provocative jokes and refers to a particular coworker or group of coworkers by using inappropriate slang or slurs, and after a complaint, the employer does nothing to stop the behavior. Another example of harassment could be a male manager who makes unwelcome sexual suggestions to a female employee and touches her inappropriately.

### Support is available

Following the necessary steps to stop the bullying behavior is important. It's also important to get support, if you are feeling isolated, stressed, angry and depressed about your situation. The Employee/Member's Assistance Program is available to provide free and confidential support for you. Just call (800) 292-2780.

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**For free and confidential support and resources call the Employee/Member/Student/Family Assistance Program (800) 292-2780 [www.ers-eap.com](http://www.ers-eap.com)**