

# Free essay on workplace bullying and appropriate organizational response

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The Australian Human Rights Commission (2012) defines Workplace Bullying as any “ verbal, physical, social or psychological abuse by your employer (or manager), another person or group of people at work”. The commission further states that this type of abuse can happen in any workplace, not just corporate offices but in shops, cafes, government offices, even community groups or schools and universities. Reported workplace bullying involves employees of lower and middle rank as well as volunteers, students, interns, casual employees and trainees.

Workplace buying is characterized as repeated and unreasonable. Normally, the intention of workplace bullying is to intimidate, degrade, humiliate, or undermine another person, putting that person in serious health and economic risk. Often, workplace bullying involves an element of power misuse, with the supposed “ more powerful “ individual or bully abusing the “ defense-less” subordinate thus affecting his work output and dignity. Cary Cooper, a British psychologist and professor at the Lancaster University Management School defines the common types of workplace bullying as:

1. A direct threat

a. To professional status including professional humiliation, unfounded accusations, intimidation and unreasonable work demands

b. To personal standing including undermining of integrity, name calling, insults, teasing, inappropriate jokes, sarcasms, innuendo, etc.

2. Isolation such as the deliberate steps to block someone of career advancement, exclusion from important events, etc.

3. Work overload and work destabilisation which includes removal of responsibilities, inappropriate work allocation, unnecessary work demands

and continuous disruptions

Workplace bullying is a very serious workplace concern. Statistics shown in the 2007 WBI-Zogby survey of US employees indicate that about 13% of employees surveyed reported current bullying. An alarming 24% of the surveyed individuals claimed they have been bullied in the past while about 12% of the surveyed individuals claiming to have witnessed bullying in the workplace. What is most alarming though is that about half of the interviews feel that they have been affected by workplace bullying in one form or another.

One may suspect that workplace bullying has some correlation to demographic markers such as gender, sexual orientation or ethnicity. However, results from the study project conducted by Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik and Alberts (2006) indicated that there is no clear connection between workplace bullying and demographic factors. However, the Workplace Bullying Institute in Bellingham, Washington reported in 2007 that women are at greater risk than men when it comes to getting bullied at the workplace. In their report, men are more likely to have aggressive bullying behaviour while women are more likely to be targeted for bullying. What is most interesting however is that the report also states that when the workplace bully is a woman, she will target to bully another woman, 7 times out of 10. In that same report, race was identified as a prevalent factor in workplace bullying, as shown in the table below. In terms of race, the race that “bullies” other people more are Hispanics (about 1 of 2 Hispanics have bullied co-workers) followed by Blacks, Whites and Asians. Asians have seen other people get bullied more in the work place (28% of the time). However,

Asians are also the primary race that claim to have neither witnessed nor been mistreated in the work place.

Table 1 Workplace Bullying and Racial Factors

## **Bullying Prevalence**

Witnessed Bullying

Neither Witnessed nor Mistreated

Hispanics (52. 1%)

Blacks (21. 1%)

Asians (57. 3%)

Blacks (46%)

Hispanics (14%)

Whites (49. 7%)

Whites (33. 5%)

Whites (10. 8%)

Hispanics (32. 2%)

Asians (30. 6%)

Asian (28. 5%)

Blacks (23. 4%)

Workplace bullying is not just a personal issue that should be handled on an individual basis. It is not something that could be dealt with alone by the employee without organizational support. Workplace bullying is a real-life systemic, organizational concern in any work environment. In business and economic terms, workplace bullying can affect the long-term viability, operations and sustainability of any business entity. Several studies have

been conducted with the attempt of quantifying real financial costs of bullying and its impact on the financial bottom line of the company. The costs of bullying include the additional cost burdened on expanded healthcare, loss in employee productivity, replacement of personnel and replacement training, the cost of workplace conflict, the cost of litigation and other legal obstructions, the costs associated with delayed implementation of corporate projects and programs, among others. The cost of workplace bullying varied greatly, according to various research is from a minimum US\$ 19 billion for losses due to unemployment, to US\$ 3 billion in the United States primarily as losses due to decreased employee productivity. Losses due to the other associated costs of work place bullying have yet to be accurately quantified but the underlying negatives of work place bullying are evident. In very simple terms, organizations that do not manage conflict within the organization, specifically workplace bullying will lose a lot of money.

Organizations must respond accordingly to the threat of workplace bullying. Professor of Law and Director of the New Workplace Institute in Suffolk University, Boston Massachusetts David C. Yamada prescribes a “ multidisciplinary” response to workplace bullying through the concepts of System, Synergy and Sweat. These intertwined concepts address work place bullying specifically (and work place harassment in general) on a macroscopic level, meaning individual circumstances are examined as part of the totality of the organization’s identity and processes and are addressed by addressing the organizations whole behavioural concerns.

## **Figure 1 Professor Yamada's Theoretical Framework for "System"**

In addition, Professor Yamada identifies and defines "Synergy" as the conjunction of groups or elements such as resources or individual efforts as the next important element in resolving workplace harassment such as bullying. The conjunction of groups working together is collectively called Synergy meaning there is a "synthesis" or joining of "energies". Truly, if only one part of the company works towards resolving workplace harassment or bullying, it can never truly be resolved. Professor Yamada includes the concept of "Sweat" and is defined as the production or manipulation through hard work. Workplace harassment is not an easy problem to deal with and will require considerable effort or "sweat" from the entirety of the organization to address effectively. The interaction of the concepts of System, Synergy and Sweat, which Professor Yamada believes are interlocking and all-required for addressing workplace bullying, must be implemented simultaneously to address the problem.

The framework espoused by Professor David Yamada seems to indicate that organizations prefer to employ a more palatable approach to workplace bullying, instead of instilling sanctions and penalties, which is a punitive type of response. A study conducted by Salin (2009) stated that organizations rely on reconciliatory measures for workplace harassment (including workplace bullying) and punitive action are very minimal and seldom employed.

Reconciliatory measures are those actions taken by the organization that focuses on positive reinforcement other than punishment, which has a negative connotation, in the workplace. Some effective organizational

responses that are reconciliatory in nature include the use of education, correct information and personnel training provided to executive and middle line managers and more importantly to line employees (rank and file) to address workplace bullying. The study by Salin also concluded that several factors such as the use of effective Human Resource Management (HRM) practices, activities that increase awareness of workplace harassment, the gender of the managers and even the size of the organization cause the organization to implement varying approaches to the development and implementation of organizational responses to workplace bullying. The general commonality however, as originally espoused by Professor Yamada, is that a systematic approach that will ensure dignity and well-being of employees using principles that promote awareness and active interventions is the most effective approach to workplace bullying. In any of the studies that Salin examined, all organizations that were effective in addressing workplace bullying utilized a system that incorporated “ Systems”, “ Synergies”, and “ Sweat” as a whole and not just in segregated parts. Other experts prescribe more detailed steps in managing workplace harassment such as bullying. According to attorney and therapist, Billy Eddy the following material steps should be taken by every organization to minimize the threat and negative effects of workplace bullying. These steps are:

1. Instituting corporate policies against workplace bullying, including healthy workplace laws. This means that top executives must recognize the validity of work place bullying as a corporate threat (an internal issue) and should address it by instituting policies that are both reconciliatory and punitive (for

use in worst case scenarios).

2. Identifying when a situation is technically classified as “ workplace bullying” and promote awareness on the consequences of work place bullying. In some cases, pressure in the work place may categorically be just that, work related stress. However, it is important that workplace bullying is identified and labelled, to avoid confusion among managers and employees.

3. Training of staff to recognize and manage workplace bullying. It is important that people who implement policies have a clear understanding of what work place bullying is. By training managers and employees, the cost of delay could also be minimized.

4. Development of clear yet confidential lines of communication. Targets of workplace bullying must have clear lines of communications with persons of authority within the organization. If there are no clear lines to communicate work place harassment, targets of work place bullying will not be able to flag the issue, become less productive, and ultimately move away from the organization thus causing all the negative effects, as explained in the previous section of this report, to the company.

5. Availability of counselling for targeted individuals and workplace bullies. Employees that have experienced work place harassment must undergo proper treatment and re-orientation. This is to help them regain losses due to stress and ensure that they do not suffer through the problems of work place harassment again. Work place bullies must undergo training and counselling as well, to identify issues causing them to harass or mistreat co-workers, with the purpose of improving their work and social connections with subordinates and co-workers.



Policies on work place interaction to mitigate harassment are also prescribed by Attorney Billy Eddy. Item number one explained above mean that managers are encouraged to provide proactive intervention to address workplace bullying. Intervention steps can be classified into four categories, as explained below.

1. Informal Intervention – use of informal settings (for instance, after-work cup of coffee conversations) to discuss with the employee the disruptive person or event. This approach would be an informal discussion about workplace environment that would be concluded with a professional response from the manager. Managers are prescribed to be encouraging and receptive to information, feelings and opinions but must show a clear understanding of whether the issue is considered as work place harassment (bullying) or work related stress.

2. Level 1: Awareness Intervention - if a disruptive pattern is identified at the work place, a formal discussion with the employee or disruptive person (bully) will be taken. Managers are encouraged to be supportive yet firm and professional at this level of intervention. This would be an already formal approach but is not envisioned as something alarming to either the harassment target or work place aggressor.

3. Level 2: Authority Intervention - in cases where the disruptive pattern persists despite awareness intervention, the next step which is authority intervention is prescribed to be taken. This is a formal approach wherein managers employ an evaluation plan to identify, categorize and address the disruptive behaviour. The responsible party is asked to review his actions, stressing that that person is highly accountable and may face punitive

consequences. However, this approach is a supportive activity rather than a punitive activity, with the intention of correcting the erring party through a quantitative and prescriptive approach. Consultations, counselling, re-training and re-orientation are the real-world examples of intervention activities at this level.

4. Level 3: Disciplinary Intervention – is a punitive response to workplace bullying after the authoritative intervention has been undertaken and has failed to remedy the situation. This is the last step in the corrective process, and as such will ultimately result in the removal of the work place aggressor.

## **Figure 2 The Hierarchy of Managerial Intervention in Addressing Workplace Harassment**

### Conclusion

An organization must promote professionalism, cooperative working environment and a framework for correct disciplinary actions. Organizations must face serious issues such as workplace bullying, through the use of systematic methods, involving the crafting and implementation of strong policies that define issues and provide practicable guidelines.

The research on workplace harassment such as bullying that is explained in this report indicates that work place bullying is a real and organizationally-threatening occurrence. The costs of bullying is quantified and is a significantly large amount that affects bottom line viability. The responses to work place bullying have been studied and evaluated by experts, with the general consensus that it can be mitigated by employing a cohesive, encompassing and concerted effort by the entire organization, putting into motion actions centred around the principles of “ system”, “ synergies” and “

sweat". Lastly, a step-wise description of the methods of managing workplace aggressors and targets indicate that organizations rely primarily on reconciliatory measures rather than punitive measures to correct and reduce or remove the threat of workplace bullying.

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