

Workplace Bullying

Workplace bullying, a form of interpersonal aggression, is not a new phenomenon. Rather, it is an existing issue with a new label that has been getting increased attention from researchers, employers, unions and health and safety professionals. It is defined as “repeated and persistent negative acts towards one or more individual(s), which involve a perceived power imbalance and create a hostile work environment” (Salin 2003).

There is growing evidence that exposure to bullying in the workplace has serious detrimental outcomes, not only for the victim, but also for the organization, workplace colleagues and family members of the victims.

Negative effects of bullying on the organization include:

- High turnover and intention to leave the organization
- Higher rates of injuries and illness
- Increased EAP costs
- Decreased commitment
- Higher levels of client dissatisfaction
- Higher rates of absenteeism
- Increased short- and long-term disability costs
- Increased WSIB costs
- Decreased productivity
- Worsened organization image

Negative effects on the victim include:

- Lower levels of job satisfaction
- Post-traumatic stress
- Permanent disability
- Psychosomatic symptoms and physical illness
- Mental illness – depression

What is Bullying?

It is important to distinguish the difference between normal worker conflict and workplace bullying. Bullying is repeated, persistent, continuous behaviour as opposed to a single negative act, and is generally associated with a power imbalance between the victim and perpetrator where the victim feels inferior. This could be: nurse to student; senior nurse to junior nurse; supervisor to

employee. Conflicts between two parties perceived of equal strength are not considered to be workplace bullying (Salin 2003).

The following are examples of workplace bullying behaviours:

- Social isolation
- Personal attack of a person’s private life and/or personal attributes
- Over-monitoring of work
- Withholding information
- Rumours
- Excessive criticism
- Verbal aggression
- Withholding job responsibility

Profile of the Bully

Characteristics of those who bully include persons with a low self-esteem, poor communication skills and persons who have unresolved work issues from earlier in their career and believe they have the right to inflict controlling and abusive behaviours onto others. They are often viewed as charmers, well liked by their supervisors. Those who bully have psychological issues that have accumulated over time and are carried throughout their life. Bullying occurs over and over again by these individuals because the organization either ignores the behaviour or does not know how to deal with the issues and enforce organizational policies procedures related to acceptable behaviours.

According to Rowell (2005), 81% of bullies are managers, 14% are peers and 5% are lower-ranking staff.

Profile of the Victim

Often the victims are staff who are hard-working, dedicated to their work and liked by others. The perpetrator perceives these individuals as threats.

Recognizing Bullying

Bullying in the workplace is often associated with ineffective management styles and/or lack of presence of management in a department/unit. Managers need

to be acutely aware of the impact that bullying has on their staff, patients and the organization. It is important to be on the lookout for potential signs and symptoms associated with bullying in a department/unit. These include:

- Grievances by employees against their manager
- Poor morale
- Individual symptoms of depression
- Increased stress and tensions between staff in a unit
- Reported fear of a co-worker by other workers
- Increased absenteeism in a department/unit

Tips for Preventing Workplace Bullying and Creating a Respectful Work Environment

Employer

- Ensure the commitment of senior leadership.
- Create a culture with standards and values against bullying.
- Develop and implement anti-discrimination/harassment policies in collaboration with the JHSC, unions and front-line staff. The policies should clearly outline acceptable and non-acceptable behaviours. There should be a zero-tolerance approach to all forms of bullying.
- Conduct a needs assessment through a workplace survey to understand organizational attitudes and practices.
- Develop and implement reporting and investigation processes. The employer must ensure that there is a procedure in place for employees to report their supervisors. This is often accomplished by appointing a delegate in the human resources department.
- Develop a conflict resolution process.
- Train supervisors and managers in how to enforce the policy and deal with complaints and situations.
- Provide a support system for staff.
- Ensure that education in bullying and in discrimination/harassment policies are included in orientation of new staff.

Supervisors

- Enforce anti-discrimination/harassment policies.
- Attend education/training sessions on how to effectively deal with bullying.
- Consult with your human resources professionals as required.
- Provide staff with regular education/training on harassment/discrimination policies.
- Provide education sessions on workplace bullying to raise awareness and understanding.
- Encourage staff to report bullying.
- Take all complaints seriously and ensure a thorough investigation is completed.
- Monitor staff behaviours and deal with inappropriate behaviours promptly. Staff who have bullied others should receive counselling.
- Investigate all complaints promptly.
- Provide support to staff and make appropriate referrals as required.
- Practice fair, equitable and transparent management practices.
- Design creative strategies to improve staff morale.
- Involve all staff in decision-making where possible.

Employees

- Clearly and publicly confront the behaviour.
- Document the episode.
- Use your organization's EAP.
- Promptly report each incident of bullying.
- Inform your union and/or JHSC representative.
- Seek medical attention as required

Reference List:

Rowell, P 2005, 'Being a target at work: Or William Tell and how the apple felt', *Journal of Nursing Administration*, vol. 35, no. 9, pp. 377-379.

Salin, D 2003, 'Ways of explaining workplace bullying: A review of enabling, motivating and precipitating structures and processes in the work environment', *Human Relations*, vol. 56, no. 10, pp.1213-1232.