

Stop Workplace Bullying

There is no excuse for workplace abuse!



What is Workplace Bullying?

Workplace bullying refers to repeated, unreasonable actions of individuals (or a group) directed towards an employee (or a group of employees), which are intended to intimidate, degrade, humiliate or undermine, or which create a risk to the health or safety of the employee(s). Bullying behavior creates feelings of defenselessness and injustice in the target and undermines an individual's right to dignity at work.

Who can be a workplace bully?

Workplace bullying often involves an abuse or misuse of power, but can reach across all levels of power in the workplace.

Abusive supervision: Occurs when supervisors engage in the sustained display of abusive behavior towards staff.

Same level or horizontal bullying: Abusive behavior that is displayed towards an individual on the same power level, such as coworker-to-coworker conflict.

Mobbing: The first thought that may come to mind when you hear the term mobbing is a horde of people with pitchforks and torches. In the workplace, mobbing occurs when abusive behaviors stem from a group of individuals targeting one individual across any power-level. For example:

- A group of subordinate employees may mob against a supervisor.

- A group of workers may mob against a fellow worker on the same power-level.
- A group of employees and supervisor(s) may mob against a subordinate employee or even another supervisor on the same or different power-level.

Five categories of bullying

Threat to professional status: Belittling someone's opinion, public humiliation, professional humiliation, accusation of lack of effort and unwanted or invalid criticism.

Threat to personal standing: Name calling, insults, teasing, sexual comments, racial, ethnic or socioeconomic slurs.

Isolation: Denying development opportunities, withholding training, withholding critical information, ignoring attempts at conversation, exclusion or social isolation.

Destabilization: Failure to give credit when due, assigning meaningless tasks, removing responsibility or assigning tasks beneath professional level.

Overwork: Excessive monitoring or micro-managing, undue pressure to produce work, giving impossible deadlines, unnecessary disruptions and work overload.

Corporate or institutional bullying explained

Corporate/institutional bullying occurs when bullying is entrenched in an organization and becomes accepted as part of the workplace culture. It can occur in different ways:

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

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.
- Increased disciplinary action.

Factors that increase the risk for bullying behavior

- Significant organizational change, such as major internal restructuring or technological changes.
- Worker characteristics, including age, gender, race and ethnicity, parental status or inexperience, such as being an apprentice or trainee.
- Workplace relationships, which might include inadequate information flow between organizational levels and lack of employee participation in decisions.
- Work systems, such as a 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

Bullying can cause emotional and physical consequences that include:

- Reduced self-esteem
- Work withdrawal, sick days

- Musculoskeletal pain
- Sleep and digestive disturbances
- Increased depression/self-blame
- Family tension
- High stress, post-traumatic stress disorder
- Financial problems due to absence or job loss
- Protecting yourself with safe work practices

How bullying affects organizations

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

1. Replacing staff members who leave as a result of being bullied, lost productivity and the cost of training new employees.
2. Work effort being redirected away from productivity towards coping with bullying incidents.
3. Costs associated with investigations of ill treatment, potential legal action, and lower quality of work due to emotional strain of bullying.
4. Cost of vicarious stress effects on bystanders of bullying in the workplace, such as absenteeism, staff turnover, mental distraction and fear of interaction with the bully.

Bullying vs. Workplace Harassment

Harassment is a type of illegal discrimination defined as offensive and unwelcome conduct, serious enough to adversely affect the terms and conditions of a person’s employment, which occurs because of the person’s protected class.

Protected classes in employment are race/color, creed (religion), national origin, sex, marital status, disability, HIV/AIDS or Hepatitis C status, sexual orientation/gender identity, and honorably discharged veteran and military status.

An example of harassment could be when an employee tells racist jokes and refers to a particular co-worker or group of co-workers by using racial 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.

Bullying also differs from retaliation, which occurs after a person makes a complaint of illegal discrimination, and is then the subject of an adverse employment action or subjected to harassment because he or she made the complaint.

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 in the workplace is not.

If you believe that you are being harassed or retaliated against for making a discrimination complaint, you should immediately contact the Washington State Human Rights Commission (1-800-233-3247, www.hum.wa.gov).

What Can Be Done About Bullying?

At the first sign of conflict check if your company has a workplace violence program or a code of conduct that addresses psychological intimidation and aggression that is not based on a protected characteristic. It can be useful to talk to the aggressor if you are comfortable with that. The person may deny the aggression, but you have let them know that you are aware and consider it unprofessional. Or talk with someone you absolutely trust in the workplace that can advise you and advocate for you while keeping your situation confidential.

What can you do about bullying?

If you are an employee, regain control:

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

Take action:

- Keep a diary detailing the nature of the bullying (e.g., dates, times, places, what was said or done and who was present).
- Obtain 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; and report the behavior to an appropriate person.
- For state employees: contact the Washington State Employee Assistance Program (www.hr.wa.gov/EAP) for guidance on dealing with the issue.

If you are an employer:

- 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 have the full support of top management.
- Address the bullying behavior IMMEDIATELY when it is witnessed or reported.
- Take complaints seriously and respond promptly. Reassign the bully, if necessary.
- Clarify task expectations for employees, supervisors and managers. Structure the work environment to incorporate a sense of autonomy, individual challenge/mastery and professional development.
- Include employees in decision-making processes.
- Hold awareness campaigns for EVERYONE on what bullying is.
- Encourage reporting.
- Ensure management is engaged with staff they supervise.
- Encourage open door policies.
- Investigate the extent and nature of the problem.
- Conduct employee attitude surveys.
- Improve management's ability and sensitivity towards dealing with and responding to conflicts.
- Establish an independent contact for employees, such as a designated human resources contact who is trained on conflict management, confidentiality and ethics.
- Provide training on respectful communication, handling conflict and building strong relationships at work.

SHARP — Research for Safe Work

This document was produced by the Safety and Health Assessment and Research for Prevention (SHARP) Program, a 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.

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