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Supporting a Healthy Organization

Prevent Workplace Bullying

Perhaps your first thought as you scan the title of this article is “bullying would never happen in my company or organization.” We encourage you to think again! Findings from several studies suggest that workplace bullying is more common than we might think. This article will discuss why employers need to be concerned about bullying at work, what bullying is, and what can be done to prevent it.

Bullying at work is common

According to Agarwal (2018), research suggests that workplace bullying is on the rise. Agarwal cites the 2017 U.S. Workplace Bullying Survey which suggests that almost 60 million U.S. workers have been affected. A more recent survey and analysis by the Workplace Bullying Institute (WBI) indicates that 39 percent of employed Americans suffer abusive conduct at work, 22 percent witness it, 61 percent are affected by it, and 73 percent are aware that workplace bullying happens (WBI, 2021).

Why is this important? Bullying affects employee retention, productivity and well-being. Employees who are subjected to bullying are more likely to leave their jobs in the attempt to cope and are more likely to suffer stress-related health problems. Agarwal (2018) describes the personal impact. “It

knocks the self-esteem of even the most resourceful and confident people, wearing them down so that they are less trusting of their own instincts and judgement and consequently unfit to work.”

Bullying affects an entire organization, not just individuals.



How leaders and managers respond, as well as their overall stance, is critical. When bullying goes unaddressed, worker morale and trust in management is eroded. Employees who perceive their employer’s reactions or responses to be harmful to the victim are not likely to report an incident. When people don’t come forward, a culture that tolerates bullying prevails. This increases the likelihood of further occurrences and creates overall stress for everyone. Such an environment leads to increased employee health problems and absences, and ultimately the loss of competent,

valuable workers.

Dynamics of bullying

Workplace bullying can be described as “discreet, hard to define and challenging to explain to another party” (Walker, 2017). Still, there are some key characteristics.

The WBI website defines bullying

as “repeated, health-harming mistreatment of one or more persons by one or more employees of an employer” (www.workplacebullying.org). Bullying behaviors can include: physical and verbal acts of intimidation, derogatory comments about a worker and their performance, disrespect and interruption in meetings, disrespectful language and jokes, rumors or gossip intended

to damage a worker’s reputation, attempts to sabotage the target employee’s work, and enlisting others in targeting the victim. According to experts, bullying behavior tends to be repetitive, verbal and may occur most often in private. In other words, the bully acts to intentionally harm another employee in a variety of ways and systematically. Since these behaviors do not always occur in the presence of others, evidence of bullying can sometimes be elusive.

Characteristics of bullies and who they target

Research indicates that most bullies in the workplace are men,

and men are more likely to be their targets (WBI, 2021). Interestingly, when a bully is female, she too tends to target other women. The theory behind this is that women may also carry unconscious bias towards other women. If bullying is based on gender biases, it is possible that other forms of bias and prejudice could contribute. Another important point is that while workplace bullying is typically carried out by an employee's superior at work, co-workers also engage in bullying.

Workplace bullies are not necessarily like the playground bullies of your past. WBI research indicates that these are individuals who probably feel insecure or threatened in some way by their target, regardless of whether there is an actual threat occurring.

Furthermore, targets of workplace bullying do not fit the stereotype of an outcast or a social loner. WBI research findings suggest that targets tend to be veteran, skilled employees. Targets of bullying are likely to be independent, possess more skill than their bully, and are well liked among their coworkers. They tend to be high in emotional intelligence and highly empathic, even demonstrating empathy for their bully. They are generally ethical and honest, prosocial employees who do not strike back. Because they typically avoid confrontation, they might not bring the bullying behavior to attention of management right away or confront the bully. This of course can support the bully to get away with their behavior, especially in a work environment where bullying behavior is not well understood or appropriately addressed.

Prevention

Walker (2017) recommends some actions that leaders can utilize to address and prevent workplace bullying. Below are some suggestions based on his work.

- Acknowledge that workplace bullying is an issue for any type or size of workplace, and that it can happen in your organization too.
- Develop a clear policy which outlines the company's position and your commitment against bullying. Share this with all employees and review on a regular basis.
- Establish a protocol for how to handle reported or witnessed bullying incidents.
- Provide education to all employees on the nature of workplace bullying from the perspective of a victim, bully, witness or observer.
- Establish a framework for employees to report bullying, including details of when and how to bypass the chain of command if the bully in question is the employee's supervisor or manager.
- Communicate and then follow through with an open-door policy that provides any employee a safe, supportive environment to report suspected bullying.

When a report is made, take this seriously. Focus on support for the targeted employee who has come forward. Document and investigate details of the report. Then take appropriate action.

Attention to organizational culture can also help inoculate your organization against bullying. A culture characterized by high levels of competition where leadership tend to be dictatorial, command and control, or disjointed in style is a culture more vulnerable to bullying incidents as

compared to a culture that encourages and values feedback and participation from employees at all levels and has collaborative, resonant leadership.

Use your EAP

Remember, your EAP is a vital resource when workplace bullying is identified. A good place to start is a request for a management consultation. Depending on the circumstances, an employee responsible for the bullying can be referred using the formal referral process and the employees who are targeted or witnessed this can be referred for supportive counseling. A consultation with EAP on aspects of organizational culture and leadership to prevent bullying from gaining a foothold in your workplace is also an excellent idea.

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