WORKPLACE BULLYING
Causes, Consequences, and Interventions

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Workplace bullying is a pattern of persistent, offensive, intimidating, malicious, insulting, or exclusionary communication and behavior that targets perceive as intentional efforts to harm, control, or drive them from the workplace. Bullying usually consists of numerous, seemingly non-serious negative acts that form a discernable pattern of abuse over time. It is usually escalatory in nature, creates or emerges from hostile work environments, and results in serious harm to organizations, workers, and human relationships outside the organization. The principal effects are damage or impairment to targets and workgroups and obstruction of organizational goals and processes. Usually, a power disparity exists between actors; the targeted party is often unable to defend against, stop, or prevent the abuse[1].

Prevalence in US: In any given six-month period, nearly 25% of US workers report experiencing persistent negative acts comprising workplace bullying. Over work histories, nearly one-half report feeling they have been bullied and over 70% report having witnessed bullying of others on their jobs[2].

Causes (Antecedents)

Individual, Target[3]

o Provocative behavior is often linked to bullying
    o Appearing too weak, anxious, or submissive
    o Being too aggressive
    o Failing to follow established group norms
    o Being an overachiever
    o Being very conscientious, literal minded, and somewhat unsophisticated
    o Being significantly different from the rest of the group

Individual, Bully[4]

    o Hypervigilant regarding environmental threats
    o Unstable, high self-esteem
    o Little or no ability to experience empathy
    o Low self-control
    o Personal volatility
    o History or tendency toward depression
    o Managers with Theory X beliefs
    o Type A personality
    o Negative affectivity

- Exposure to domestic violence
- Past victim of child abuse
- Acting out as a schoolyard bully
- Alcohol and drug abuse
- Past aggressive behavior

a. Aggression in response to threatened positive self-assessments
b. Low social or communication proficiencies
c. Efforts to gain political power

Organizational[5]

- "Boiler room" environments
- Competitive, hard-driving cultural image of corporate leaders as "movers and shakers" often condones worker mistreatment
- Inspiring terror by abusing/ridiculing employees—a misguided but common notion of how to motivate workers
- Companies that hire bullies find their behavior acceptable; may even seek them out to "whip their companies into shape"
- Disorganized, exploitive work environments
- Workplaces where
  - involvement is not facilitated,
  - morale is low,
  - teamwork is not encouraged,
  - supervision is problematic
- Increased pressure to produce with downsized employee bases
- Negative, stressful work environments marked by worker role-conflict and strain;
- Organizational cultures that embrace extreme conformity to corporate identification
- Cultures that accept bullying as an aspect of doing business
- Autocratic/authoritarian rather than participatory leadership styles
- Lack of space or privacy
- Physically uncomfortable equipment/accommodations
- Electronic surveillance
- Feelings of job insecurity
- Individual compensation based on team production
- Dynamics that enable bullying:
  - Perceived power imbalance
  - Low perceived costs
  - Dissatisfaction and frustration with the working situations and organizational climate
- Dynamics that motivate bullying:
  - High internal competition and a politicized climate
  - Reward system and expected benefits for perpetrator
  - Organizational cultures that maintain an adversarial and aggressive approach to work and interpersonal relationships
- Dynamics that precipitate bullying

- o Restructuring
- o Downsizing
- o Organizational crises
- o Organizational change

Social[6]
- o Economic globalization that increases competitive pressure on corporations and their workers
- o Working under implicit/explicit threat of losing their jobs to lower-paid labor overseas, to lower-wage regions inside industrially advanced nations, or to technological displacement
- o Bullying, "slash-and-burn" executive is held up as a model of success

Impacts/Consequences

Individual[7]

- o Chronic workplace stressor
- o Heightened levels of anxiety
- o Depression, burnout, frustration, helplessness
- o Negative emotions such as anger, resentment, and fear
- o Difficulty concentrating
- o Lowered self-esteem and self-efficacy
- o Increased alcohol/drug use/abuse
- o Relationship between bullying and symptoms such as hypervigilance, rumination, and nightmares, consistent with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or Prolonged Duress Stress Disorder (PDSD)
- o Prolonged exposure may lead to suicidal thoughts and actual attempts at suicide
- o Linked to variety of job-related attitudes (both targets and witnesses):
  - o decreased job satisfaction,
  - o reduced organizational commitment,
  - o greater intention to leave
  - o increased absenteeism, tardiness, and voluntary turnover.
- o Linked to poorer physical health including:
  - o Musculo-skeletal disorders such as body aches, particularly backaches; psychosomatic ailments such as stomach upset, headaches, and nausea; and sleeping problems such as insomnia or frequent waking
  - o Increased risk of cardio-pulmonary disease

Workgroup[8]

- o Bullying supervisor has greater (more substantial) impact on employees same behavior initiated by co-workers, subordinates, or customers
- o Fear may reduce risk-taking behavior with adverse impact on creativity and innovation.

- Employees unlikely to approach such a supervisor with "bad news," thereby impacting the supervisor's ability to "nip problems in the bud" or acquire information necessary for informed decision making.
- Having bully on the team may have deadly consequences (aircraft personnel's fear lead to airplane crashes)
- In healthcare settings, nurses and other front-line personnel may be reluctant to challenge questionable decisions made by abusive physicians
- Adversely impact group performance by creating a "toxic" work climates where negative emotions (fear, distrust, anger) predominate, mistrust/ suspicion run rampant
- Reduced peer helping behavior
- Lower levels of creativity
- Decreased willingness to initiate conversations with others
- Decreased receptiveness to persuasive communications
- Predisposition to perceptions of failure

Organization[9]

- $5-$6 billion dollars lost every year in the U.S. economy because of real or perceived abuse of employees (conservative figure)
- Substantial cost to organizations in the form of disciplinary actions, EEO, and Office of Workers Compensation Programs (OWCP) claims, not to mention expenses related to occupational safety and health
- Costs of turnover, absenteeism, decreased productivity
- Costs of litigation when employees seek outside redress for their unfair treatment
- Increased medical insurance costs, workers compensation insurance expense
- Lost opportunity costs
- Damaged public reputation
- Reduced quality staff attracted
- Impoverished workforce remains

Interventions

Individual[10]

- Believe what they are saying
- Reaffirm that what they are experiencing is a known phenomenon
- Help them become aware of what is happening (bullying makes people feel "crazy")
- Personal survival is about recognizing what is happening when target is only slightly affected
- Understand that bullying unnerves people and leaves them feeling (and sometimes acting) unbalanced
- Recognize that bullying is often more about the pattern of aggression than single, extraordinary hostile events
- Explain some aspects of the bully psychological profile (especially lack of empathy coupled with hypervigilance and unstable, high self-esteem)
- Given this profile, avoid advising targets toward confrontational encounters (more likely to enrage than persuade; usually leads to retaliation/escalation)

- o Confronting bully in groups is potentially even more volatile
- o If the behavior is at its earliest appearance, direct opposition to the behavior may be effective (keeping the potential downside in mind)
- o Counsel on the risks/benefits of taking the issue on
  - o Time, energy, potentially money
  - o Emotionally draining
- o Individuals often ill-equipped to take this on alone
  - o Team up with others at work, especially non-targets, determine goal, speak to HR or other decision makers
  - o Seek organizational help from HR or other decision makers (union, upper-management, etc.)
    - Speak rationally, calmly
    - Provide *concrete* examples (i.e., "on 2/2/05, at the staff meeting, Sue …)
    - Illustrate through concrete examples the development and escalation (if applicable)
    - Avoid "always" "never" sort of language
    - Go to HR, union, upper-management with others (but not huge groups, maybe 2 or 3)
    - Although it is emotional experience, talk about it in as calm and rational a manner as possible
    - Link the behavior to issues of concern to the organization (turnover, reduced productivity, lost creativity, absenteeism, violence, etc.)
    - Understand that you may never find out what actually happens (privacy laws)
  - o Maintain the targets' confidentiality if reporting (issue of retaliation)
  - o Teach target "one-across" responses and questioning, nonthreatening ways of communicating (rather than trying to "win" or "get the upper hand")
    - One-across communication neutralizes control
      - "I agree with what you're suggesting"
      - "That is a very interesting approach; how about adding to it in this manner…"
    - Questions can be nonthreatening ways of communicating
      - What do you think about…?
      - What do you think is causing…?
      - How would you proceed from here?
      - How would you like this to look?
  - o Encourage person to explore other potential employment opportunities, should this be a viable option

Organizational[11]

- o Most bullying goes unreported because of the risk of "going public" [only 1/3 to 1/2 of targets report to a supervisor]
- o Efforts to address workplace bullying require an ongoing assessment of the nature and extent of the problem (i.e., tools: NAQ, WAQ-R)
- o If measures of strengths and risks are part of the organizational environment, rather than singling out individuals, this is less threatening

- o The types of bullying/abuse will be different in different workgroups; interventions based on targeted data collection are most likely to pinpoint the unique issues
- o In multi-section/department organizations, organizations might even share aggregate data (creates "competitive" motivation to be civil)
- o Effective prevention and management strategies must contain the following:
  - o Process must be data-driven—based on accurate assessment of nature/scope of problem
    - ▪ Reliable/accurate mechanism for collection of data related to "low-level" abuse associated with bullying
    - ▪ Ideally capture (and respond to) all forms of aggression before escalation to more intense levels caught by existing reporting procedures (e.g., grievance procedures, arbitration records, discrimination or sexual harassment claims, workplace violence claims, worker's compensation claims, and police reports).
    - ▪ Data then used to identify problems and specifically target interventions to address problems.
  - o Process must involve active participation/support of individuals at all levels in organizational hierarchy
    - ▪ Those responsible for identifying problems, taking actions, providing financial and human resources, granting authority, and arranging or providing logistical support.
    - ▪ Rank-and-file employees, first-line supervisors, middle- and upper-level management, senior executives and, within the context of collective bargaining units, union representatives and union leadership.
    - ▪ Participation may include organizational insiders/outsiders called on to provide special expertise or assistance (e.g., academic researchers, HR professionals, change agents, process consultants, etc.).
  - o Approach must change very nature of conversations occurring within organization, in terms of both content and process.
  - o An atmosphere must be created in which such activities are encouraged and supported.
  - o Process must be continuously and rigorously monitored, evaluated, and adjusted as planned actions are implemented and new data obtained

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