

CPH News and Views

A semi-monthly column on emerging topics related to healthy workplaces

Issue #44: Workplace Bullying, Consequences and Solutions

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Bullying is defined by the Workplace Bullying Institute as repeated, health-harming mistreatment by one or more people of an employee by: verbal abuse, threats, intimidation, humiliation, work interference, sabotage, exploitation of a known vulnerability, or any combination of these.⁽¹⁾ It often incorporates behavior intended to harass or exclude a target from a social or work setting, or to undermine his/her work. Abusive behavior may be perpetrated by a single individual or sometimes by a group (“mobbing”) and often includes a power imbalance between the perpetrator and the target.⁽²⁾

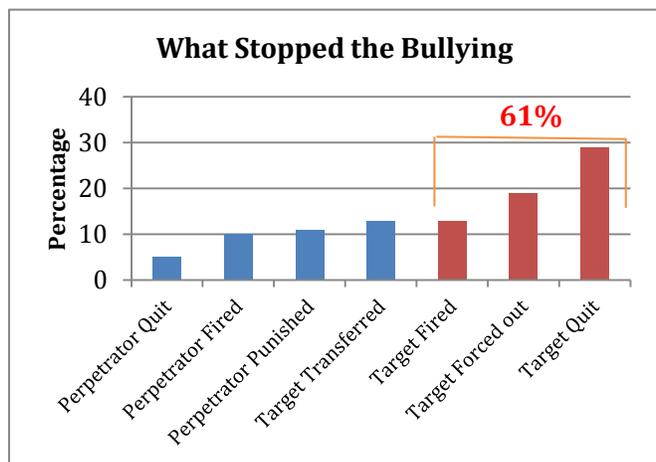
Unlike other definitions of unethical behavior in the workplace, such as sexual harassment and racial discrimination, workplace bullying does not specify the target as belonging to a specific group or protected class, such as a gender, sexual orientation or racial minority.

According to a survey conducted in 2014 by The Workplace Bullying Institute, 20% of Americans have experienced workplace bullying. Another 21% have been witnesses. This represents over 65 million workers affected by workplace bullying.⁽³⁾ Targets of workplace bullying often experience health consequences such as stress, emotional problems (depression, anxiety), post-traumatic stress disorder, physical health issues, and sleep problems.^(2,4,5) Witnesses may suffer some of these same effects.^(2,6) In addition to the health impacts, workplace bullying can result in decreased job satisfaction and commitment to work, with related absenteeism and productivity problems for the employer.^(7,8)

Some studies indicate that work environment characteristics may play a role in permitting or facilitating the occurrence of bullying. These factors include role ambiguity (ambiguous job profile), differences in power between employees (hierarchy), and a de-emphasis on collaboration and the quality of interpersonal relations.^(6,9)

Currently there is little recourse for bullied employees because there are no laws that provide for legal resolution.⁽¹⁰⁾ Even when a target brings the abuse to the attention of his/her employer, the employer may fail to take appropriate action. In one study, unfortunately, 61% of targets ended up leaving their jobs either because they were fired or as the only way to stop the bullying (figure).⁽³⁾

There may be a role for legislation to prevent workplace bullying. For example, laws designed to prevent and address discrimination and the infliction of emotional distress exist. However these have proven ineffective in addressing bullying due to the non-protected status of some bullying targets.⁽¹¹⁾ Creating legislation to specifically address bullying would remove this obstacle for targets seeking justice. Legislation that puts the onus on employers to prevent workplace bullying may engage them in creating workplace policy as well.



Many states have introduced workplace bullying legislation, but no laws have been passed yet. In Massachusetts, the Healthy Workplace Bill (HB 1771) has 57 legislative co-sponsors and two lead sponsors in 2015. The bill provides ways for bullied employees to address grievances as well as protections for employers who act to prevent bullying.⁽¹²⁾

Employers do not need to wait for a law to ensure a healthy workplace. The Workplace Bullying Institute recommends setting and enforcing clear guidelines to protect employees from the harmful effects of bullying.

How to prevent and address bullying within the workplace ⁽¹³⁾

- Establish a zero tolerance policy that defines bullying behaviors.
- Educate all employees on bullying behaviors, how to report bullying and consequences to targets and the organization.
- Train supervisors to model respectful behavior and open communication to encourage worker participation.
- Address bullying incidents seriously and follow through with actions as detailed in the workplace policy.
- Ensure that targets or witnesses do not face retaliation for reporting.

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