



Dealing with Office Bullies: Developing Respect, Service, and Safety On The Job

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There are many names for it:

bullying, incivility, disrespect, psychological abuse, and emotional harassment. In some corners of the work world, it is even referred to as psychoterror. No matter what it's called, the results are the same — time lost from work, unhappy employees, medical claims, legal fees, and ultimately, dissatisfied customers.

The cost, both financial and in quality of life, is enormous.

Simply stated, workplace bullying is any negative behavior that demonstrates a lack of regard for other workers. This can include a vast number of disrespectful behaviors including:

- Harassment
- Incivility
- Teasing
- Gossiping
- Purposely withholding business information
- Overruling decisions without a rationale
- Sabotaging team efforts
- Demeaning others
- Verbal intimidation

The International Labour Organization's (ILO) definition of workplace violence includes the definition of bullying:

Any incident in which a person is abused, threatened, or assaulted in circumstances related to their work. These behaviors would originate from customers, co-workers at any level of the organization. This definition would include all forms of harassment, bullying, intimidation, physical threats/assaults, robbery, and other intrusive behaviors (Canada Safety Council n.d.).

Recent research from the National Institute for Occupational Health and Safety (NIOSH) suggests that workplace bullying is on the rise. Specifically, data from a 2004 survey indicates that, "24.5% of the companies surveyed reported that some degree of bullying had occurred there during the preceding year. 55.2% involved the employee as the 'victim,' 10.5% the customer, and 7% the supervisor" (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2004).

Bullying can only occur within a work environment that tolerates incivility. Despite the prevalence of incivility and its damaging impact, organizational responses are spotty, at best. Some managers ignore incivility because they do not want to get involved in messy interpersonal conflict; some never hear about the incidents or, if they do, they discount their importance as so-called personal matters. Others permit or even reward brutal confrontation among employees as a key to competitive advantage. But, if rude words and subtle negative behaviors are overlooked, they can bear heavily on targets, their coworkers, their family and friends, their organizations and their customers.

“Our research shows that when targets believe that someone at work has treated them disrespectfully, half will lose work time worrying about future interactions with the instigator, and half will contemplate changing jobs to avoid a recurrence. One-fourth of research respondents who feel that they have been treated uncivilly will intentionally cut back their work efforts. A few will steal from their instigators or their organizations. Some will sabotage equipment. Most will tell friends, family and colleagues about how badly they have been treated ... in the worst case, some targets of incivility will exit” (Pearson and Porath 2005).

Sometimes workplace bullying can lead to workplace violence in individuals whose other precipitating factors predispose them to violence. Long before physicality surfaces, workplace violence has already happened through words, looks and insinuations.

The possibility of violence is but one of the many complex problems associated with workplace bullying. Other concerns include emotional, psychological, and medical difficulties associated with such incivility.

Associated issues include the direct impact of bullying on worker productivity and customer service. It can seriously affect a company's bottom line through direct and indirect costs.

The costs associated with such behavior can be staggering. Psychologist Michael H. Harrison, PhD, of Harrison Psychological Associates quotes a survey of 9,000 federal employees indicating that 42% of female and 15% of male employees reported being harassed within a two-year period, resulting in a cost of more than \$180 million in lost time and productivity (Urbanski-Farrell 2002).

There are no laws in the United States that clearly provide protection from workplace bullying and incivility. However, limited protection may exist through federal laws, including:

- Occupational Safety and Health Act.
- Title VII Hostile Work Environment Doctrine.
- Americans with Disabilities Act.
- National Labor Relations Act (Yamada 2000).

“The first anti-bullying law in North America came into effect in 2004. Quebec amended its Labour Standards Act to deal with psychological harassment in the workplace. This act defines psychological harassment as, ‘any vexatious behavior in the form of repeated and hostile or unwanted conduct, verbal comments, actions or gestures that affect an employee's dignity or psychological or physical integrity and that results in a harmful work environment for the employee’” (Canada Safety Council, 2004).

EA Professionals Can Help

Employee assistance professionals are in a unique position to significantly impact workplace bullying and incivility. The EAP exists to help both employer and employee, and your role in helping to maintain a respectful

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workplace can contribute to your company's profitability.

Suggestions include:

- Model being respectful in your workplace at all times.
- Listen to employee concerns.
- Constructively advocate solutions.
- Support policies that call for respectful behavior at all levels.
- Implement an ongoing training process that advocates infusing respectful attitudes and behaviors in the workplace.
- Provide skill building training in respectful behavior.

Other helpful strategies for EAP professionals:

- Understand that conflict occurs naturally in any company.
- Conflicts are easier to resolve when they are addressed early.
- Every employee can benefit from the knowledge of basic conflict resolution skills.

Ongoing Training and Auditing

Ongoing training is a vital element in building a culture that constantly evaluates the important elements in building a respectful and safe workplace.

Whereas training for sexual harassment is information-based in clarifying legal definitions, boundaries and obligations, training for civility is

skill-based. In some cases, improving individual competencies such as conflict resolution, negotiation, dealing with difficult people, stress management, listening, and coaching can curtail incivility. Expectations regarding these skills should be tied to performance and career advancement. Expertise developed through such skills can yield additional positive impact in enhanced day-to-day dealings with coworkers and customers, as well as improved performance. When we gathered data from the instigator's perspective, we found that one-fourth of the instigators we surveyed blame their uncivil behavior on lack of training (Pearson and Porath 2005).

One such program that provides specific skill building training in addressing the problem of workplace bullying is The Crisis Prevention Institute's (CPI) Prepare TrainingSM Program. The Prepare TrainingSM Program is a workplace protocol system which fosters a culture of *Respect, Service and Safety at WorkSM*, with goals of:

- Establishing adaptable solutions to prevent and/or effectively manage disruptive or dangerous situations
- Strengthening and preserving valuable relationships with coworkers and customers
- Aiding in employee retention and service recovery when problematic situations damage relations
- Empowering employees to apply training concepts realistically
- Providing benefit analysis information
- Promoting an understanding of policies and procedures (Crisis Prevention Institute [CPI], 2005)

CPI has developed an audit tool to track your information immediately and also over time. An audit can help companies organize their policies to promote values and clarify expectations for all employees, by

using the categories of respect, service, and safety. Promoting a workplace culture that conveys expectations relating to respectful interactions, quality service, and safety can help prevent emergency situations that arise from incivility, aggression, and violence. This audit is available at no cost at www.preparetraining.com/ ■

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