

# Solutions Digest

Mental Health and Substance Abuse Issues That Affect the Workplace

August – 2011

## Bullying in the Workplace

### Prevalence of Bullying in the Workplace

Nearly half of all American workers (49%) report they have been affected by workplace bullying. In 2010, two U.S. surveys conducted by Zogby International for the Workplace Bullying Institute found that 35% of workers have experienced bullying firsthand with an additional 15% witnessing it. Sixty-two percent of bullies are men and 58% of targets are women. Bullying is four times more prevalent than illegal harassment with 68% of bullying being between same-gender employees. The prevalence of this issue is cause for concern – particularly due to its affect on morale, yet bullying in the U.S. is not specifically addressed by current laws.

### Defining Workplace Bullying

What is bullying and what is the difference between bullying and harassment? Bullying is distinct from harassment. Harassment is direct, lacks self-discipline, and is often physical. Harassment is often linked to sexuality, race or disability. Harassment can be a single incident. Harassment is much easier to recognize and because of this, harassment is more easily stopped. Workplace policies and procedures can be put in place to eliminate it.

Bullying is about power and control and is based on competence. It can include all types of interpersonal harassment and psychological violence. Few workplace bullying incidents are blatantly illegal. Many may be near the line of acceptable behavior or barely over it. Bullying is systematic, planned and repeated. It escalates. It is often a collection of behaviors which when taken individually look trivial but when viewed as a collective become more evident as abuse.

Bullying crosses all organizational levels from the top-down as well as the bottom-up. It is characterized by repetition, duration, escalation, power disparity and attributed intent. Bullying may include insults about work, belittling in public, nit-picking, hazing rituals or excessive monitoring of performance. Bullying may even include threats to get fired in its more direct form. Indirect bullying behaviors can include denying or minimizing another person's accomplishments, blaming a person for errors he or she has not committed, taking

credit for tasks completed by another, isolating an individual, or omitting vital information to cause another to make errors, be blamed or harmed.

### Impact of Bullying in the Workplace

Bullying has economic as well as inhumane consequences. When unchallenged bullying poisons the workplace, undermines productivity and contributes to risk exposure. Organizations are also beginning to take note of workplace bullying because of the costs in terms of employee health. Bullying is linked to a host of physical, psychological, organizational and social costs. Reactions of those who have been bullied include symptoms of depression, anxiety, aggression and even backlash or suicide.

- One study found that 1 in 10 targets of bullying experience post traumatic stress disorder.
- 44% of respondents were affected as much as battered women or child abuse victims.

Even those who witness bullying can experience fear, stress and emotional exhaustion. The work environment may experience a drop in motivation, factions and 'wars' within a department, excessive turnover and increases in discipline problems, suspensions, and terminations.

### What do Participants Get from Bullying

Believe it or not, each role in bullying (bully, bullied, and bystanders) all get something from bullying, or the process would stop. The bully wants a reaction. The bullied may fear that some deeper truth may come out – if the bullying wasn't taking place perhaps some fundamental incompetency would be exposed. Bystanders want anonymity or may fear that they, too, will be bullied.

### How is Bullying Behavior Changed

Bystanders can take away the "approving audience" by which the bully gains power. They can also challenge the person being bullied about what makes them the target and can encourage them to stand against it. Additionally, bullies understand how the "rules of the game" work, so if clear and consistent boundaries are set, the rules are changed and behaviors will change.

*This quarterly newsletter is designed to give you brief and useful information about mental health and addiction issues in the workplace. If you have questions regarding strategies for mental health issues in the workplace, or newsletter questions or suggestions, contact:*

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