

## **My Manager Took My Lunch Money: A Look at Workplace Bullying**

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### **Abstract**

*Workplace bullying is when a person is singled out by others for embarrassing or intimidating treatment. Studies find that 37- 50 percent of workers have been exposed to bullying. This paper defines behaviors, recognizes methods, and discusses the policies managers and employees can use in an attempt to eliminate bullying in the workplace.*

**Key Words:** bullying, workplace bullying, organizational bullying, harassment

### **1. Introduction**

Workplace bullies do not contribute to successful organizations and can only thrive in an environment that tolerates it. Bullies create a stressful environment and may constitute a significant threat to the health, safety and welfare of the employees. This stressful environment could potentially have wider implications for employers, including low morale, increased absenteeism, and high staff turnover. This may lead to reduced profitability and a decreased company public value. Employers need to be aware that workplace bullying may not always be committed by an employee. It may be perpetrated by a client, customer, person in position of authority, or other business contacts and can also be carried out by an individual or a group.

This paper will first discuss the definition of workplace bullying including the various types of behavior considered bullying and those which are not considered bullying incidents but are signs of a poor manager. It is important to note that workplace bullies are not so different than the ones found on the playgrounds. What makes this paper important is the discussion of the methods HR Managers, targets, or victims can use to change this offensive and unwelcome conduct.

### **2. Workplace Bullying**

#### **2.1 Definition**

The author used the definition presented by the United States Department of Justice (2011) describing bullying as "a form of abuse. It involves repeated acts over time that attempt to create or enforce one person's power over another, thus creating an "imbalance of power". The Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (2011) employs this definition of bullying as "repeated incidents or a pattern of behavior that is intended to intimidate, offend, degrade or humiliate a particular person" (CPI, 2011). This environment only exists where the behavior of one person is able to control or strongly influence the behavior of another.

#### **2.2 Bullying Behavior**

The culture of a workplace is often shown by its values, beliefs and what is considered to be normal behavior. An individual or group may become targets of workplace bullying because others perceive them as being new or different. A culture may foster people who show aggression and encourage some of the reasons people bully. Some reasons behind this unacceptable behavior include when the bully:

- has low self-esteem and needs a boost of self-worth by picking on a weaker person;
- is dependent upon their perceived power or position of power over their target and have the desire to undermine a subordinate;
- Is envious and loves to spread lies and rumors about his or her target. These lies can sometimes be quite vicious and damage the victim's reputation.

- Perceives the target as a threat either personally or to their position within the company.
- Lacks social competencies including emotion and intelligence (Salin, 2003; Zapf & Gross, 2001).

No one deserves or asks to be bullied. Yet here are a variety of additional reasons or ways a person would bully another person in the workplace. The Workplace Bullying Institution (WBI, 2010) discovered that bullying behavior can also include;

- withholding important information from someone;
- practical jokes, especially if they occur repeatedly to the same person;
- failing to invite someone consistently to important meetings;
- constantly changing work guidelines or establishing impossible deadlines that will set up the individual to fail;
- passive aggressive behavior intending to harm another group.

These behaviors may range from being discourteous and disrespectful to verbal and physical aggression. Bullies may go so far as sabotaging the victim's work. This can be outright by destroying or stealing a work product, or more subtle by altering someone's PowerPoint presentation or omitting a page from a report. Extreme forms of bullying take the form of violence, including assault or stalking actions which constitute a criminal offence. Law enforcement should be made aware if these extreme behaviors exist. Bullying at work remains a significant work environment stressor that occurs even more frequent than sexual harassment.

### **2.3. Bullying vs Sexual Harassment**

Harassment is defined as "unwanted conduct that violates people's dignity or creates an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment" (Cade, 2009). Bullying in the workplace has often been compared to sexual harassment and there are times the bully may cross the line into harassment. However there are reasons why workplace bullying is more injurious than sexual harassment. Sexual harassment is illegal. Workplace bullying is not unless it involves harassment based on race/color, religion, national origin, sex, age, or disability. Targets of bullying and sexual harassment may both sustain significant psychological injury. However victims of sexual harassment can appeal to the powers that be for justice; while targets of workplace bullying cannot, unless company policies are implemented (Cade, 2009; Chekwa & Thomas, 2013). The concept of "hostile work environment" has been adopted from existing definitions of sexual harassment (Pryor & Fitzgerald, 2003), showing that both phenomena are different forms of work-place harassment, which have severe consequences for the well-being and job satisfaction of the target. Compared to targets of sexual harassment, bullied workers quit their jobs more often, are unhappy, stressed at work, and less committed to the workplace (Gumbus & Meglich, 2012).

### **2.4. Negative Effects on Employees**

Workplace bullying can have serious negative effects on employees, such as stress, absenteeism and low productivity, lowered self-esteem and depression, anxiety, digestive upsets, high blood pressure, insomnia, trouble with relationships due to stress over work, and even post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Targeted employees may experience enough fear, anxiety, and depression that they can develop a kind of post-traumatic stress disorder leading to psychological harm and actual physical illness. This leads to absenteeism and turnover as bullied employees avoid or flee the torturous workplace. Person-related bullying is related more to the personal characteristics of the targets, so regardless of their commitment to the organization, exit from the organization tends to be the preferable alternative for the victim (Rasool et al., 2013). Targets of bullying may develop a sense of negative self-worth and this negative culture may hinder creativity and ability to respond to difficult goals. The breakdown of morale may mean that employees fail to contribute their best work and become less honest about performance.

### **2.5. Negative Effects on Organizations**

Bullying is also bad for business. Some of the ways that companies suffer due to bullying include:

- High turnover, which is expensive for companies as they invest in hiring and training new employees only to lose them shortly thereafter, possibly to a competitor
- Low productivity affecting the bottom line since employees are not motivated to do their best and are more often out sick due to stress-related illnesses

- Lost innovations since the bully is more interested in attacking his or her target than advancing the company, and the victims become less likely to generate or share new ideas
- Difficulty hiring quality employees as word spreads that the company has a hostile work environment

A survey conducted in the U.S. by Business Legal Research (BLR,2012)found a range of “between 37 and 50 percent of employees view themselves as having been bullied at some point in their careers”. This same study reported that 31 percent of Human Resources personnel had been bullied and over half of that bullied group believed it was because of their role in human resources and their associated responsibilities. If the personal implications weren’t enough, there is also a financial aspect to this situation .In the United States, the actual cost is cited as \$250 million annually in expenditures related to health care, litigation, staff turnover, and retraining from workplace bullying”(BLR, 2012). WBI (2010) estimated that each case of bullying leads to turnover costs equal to double the salary of the person who leaves because of the bully.

## **2.6. Witnesses to Bullying**

Victims feelings of being overwhelmed can impact not only the target, but other workers who witness the bullying. Studies have shown that the stress and desire to quit also translates to the witnesses of workplace bullying. Witnessing or learning about these impacts of workplace bullying is likely to promote empathetic responses. Employees witnessing coworkers being bullied, or merely talking to them about their experiences, are pushed toward taking the targets’ perspective (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006; Namie & Namie, 2003).

## **2.7. Workplace Bullying Survey**

WBI conducted the U.S. workplace bullying surveys in 2007 and again in 2010. Over 7740 online interviews were conducted in the largest national scientific survey of this topic to date. Key findings from the surveys included:

- Over 37% of surveyed U.S. workers have been bullied and an additional 15% have witnessed another worker being bullied.
- 45% experienced interference with their work
- Bullying is largely ignored by U.S. law, even though it is four times more prevalent than illegal harassment.
- Employers ignore bullying, and in 62% of cases do nothing or worsen the situation, even though they lose millions of workers annually due to bullying.
- Most bullies are bosses (72%), and the victims are rank and file employees (55%).
- Targets are more frequently female (57%).
- Bullies are more often male (62%).

### **2.7.1. Bad Behaviors Not Considered Bullying**

It is also important to note behaviors which are not bullying but may be considered behaviors of bad managers (WBI, 2010). Examples of bad behavior that is not bullying:

- An occasional incident involving an angry outburst or inappropriate statement
- A manager who shouts at or criticizes all of his or her employees
- Guidance or direction from authority figures
- A co-worker who is critical of everything

When negative comments are based on a legally protected status, it is considered harassment, not bullying and legal action may be taken (Bible, 2012; Von Bergen, Zalvaletta & Soper, 2006). Frequent comments about an individual may be bullying; but frequent comments about many employees are just plain bad management.

## **3. Best Practices**

Workplace bullying can be devastating to employees and costly to companies, so many companies have instituted zero-tolerance policies toward workplace bullying. In these companies, if an employee is being bullied he or she needs to document the bullying and present the problem to the proper person in the company, usually someone in human resources or upper management. Companies with good anti-bullying policies usually hold meetings from time to time to remind employees what workplace bullying is, how to report it, and the consequences for bullying (Beirne & Hunter, 2013; Keashly & Neuman, 2004; Nierle, 2013; Zapf & Gross, 2001).

### 3.1. Workplace Bullying Policies

Previous authors have reviewed the elements considered relevant when preventing bullying and establishing intervention measures. (Appelbaum, Semerjian, & Mohan, 2012; Coombs & Holladay, 2004; Duffy, 2009; Osif, 2010). These authors stress the importance that the organization treats a bullying incident in the same way a complaint about sexual harassment is handled. Write down the details of the employee's complaint along with any supporting evidence, such as the names of any witnesses, email messages, and other relevant documentation.

Organization leaders have a duty to expand their existing anti-violence or anti-harassment policies to include bullying. The statements should clearly define bullying, include a procedure for raising and handling complaints, and effectively discipline perpetrators. It is also important to include a non-retaliation clause so that no adverse actions are taken against the target or victim who registers the complaint.

The policy statement should establish expectations of appropriate behavior and consequences for failing to comply while also developing a complaint handling and investigation procedure. The organization should take responsibility to provide training, education, information and awareness on workplace bullying. The strategies and plans that are used to control the risks relating to workplace bullying need to suit the specific size and structure of the workplace, as well as being realistic and achievable. They should be designed to create long-term change within the workplace and not used as a quick fix for the problem. There should be ongoing review and evaluation of the specific strategies and plans that have been implemented into a workplace. When an incident is reported, the bullying behavior should be addressed at once.

### 3.2. Employee Actions

Individual employees have to first recognize that they are being bullied and that being bullied is about control. The employee may try to deal with the situation themselves first and various methods should be discussed in the initial employment orientation, and contained in the Anti-bullying Policy within the employee handbook. Subsequently, the organization should designate someone internally or externally where an employee may turn and show their documentation and suggest the designated person speak to a witness. In situations where the employee is not feeling frightened or threatened, they might decide to try and work it out. However, the bully will probably deny and perhaps misconstrue the accusations and not be willing to change his or her behavior.

Just as on the playground, it may be possible to ignore the bully. Bullies are looking for a reaction and often lose interest if they aren't given the satisfaction of a response. Have a saying or a statement that can be repeated silently when the bully approaches to block out a sense of fear. When a bully is doing their best to be negative, try to remain positive.

To stop bullying, it can be helpful to tell someone about the bullying incident(s). This can seem scary at first, but telling someone may boost feelings of confidence and help to work out how to solve the problem. Talking to someone is particularly important if there are feelings of being unsafe or frightened. Asking for help or talking to someone about the situation is not being weak. In fact, telling someone can take a lot of strength and courage. In the workplace, talking to a human resource manager or union representative may give the target the needed support and confidence. This person may have suggestions for dealing with the situation that were not previously considered.

#### 3.2.1. Standing up to the Bully

Bullies usually pick on people who they think are weaker than they are, so it might help to act more confident and stand up to the person. This has been the suggestion given by most high school guidance counselors. This responsive behavior has been known to go either of two ways: the bully will go away or the victim is pounded into the ground (Chekwa, 2013; CPI, 2011; Gardner & Johnson, 2001; Goldman & Lewis, 2006; Harvey et al., 2006).

There are suggested methods on how to stand up to a bully:

- Telling him/her to leave you alone may get a bully off your back;
- Being unusually nice to a bully may throw him/her off;
- Using humor may confuse the bully and throw him/her off track;
- Trying positive self-talk as in repeating thoughts such as, 'I know I am better than what they are saying. I don't have to pick on other people to know that I am good'.

It might be possible for the target to avoid the bully; this becomes virtually impossible if the bully is the immediate boss. A better idea instead is to avoid being alone with him/her. By avoiding a bully, the target is not giving in, merely postponing the confrontation.

#### **4. Conclusion**

It is the goal of this paper to offer an approach in understanding workplace bullying, Beginning with reasons why bullies target other employees, this article lists various reactions to this behavior and repercussions. It is obvious that management needs to step up training and deal with complaints swiftly. From the playground to the workplace, bullying is an issue which deserves more in-depth legal and policy focus than is currently being offered. Employers need to revisit and revise their workplace policies to include consequences for bullying and additional training for their workers. Employees have the right to work in a safe environment free from bullying.

#### **5. Limitations and Future Research**

Although it is recognized that there is “cyber-bullying” and also that a client or customer may commit bullying behavior, to include them is beyond the scope of this paper. This paper only addresses the management of bullying behavior committed within the workplace.

The next step for this line of research would be to begin capturing data from former bullies as to the methods which helped them to curb their destructive ways. This paper also lays the foundation for empirical research on how well different methods work from both the managers’ and the targets’ perspective.

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