

Anti-Bullying Presentation by Jamie Jones-Sagehorn

Bullying can be defined as “Repeated and persistent attempts by one person to torment, wear down, frustrate, or get a reaction from another. It is treatment which persistently provokes, pressures, frightens, intimidates or otherwise discomforts a person” – Dr. Carroll Brodsky.

Workplace bullying is much more commonplace than we might think. A recent national survey commissioned by the Workplace Bullying Institute uncovered the following:

- 35% of the U.S. workforce (an est. 53.5 million Americans) report being bullied at work
- An additional 15% witness it.
- Half of all Americans have directly experienced it.
- Simultaneously, 50% report neither experiencing nor witnessing bullying. Hence, a "silent epidemic."

Ms. Sagehorn obtained her J.D. and has since practiced employment law and then moved on to serve as the Director of Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action at a mid-sized university. At the university, Jamie has given hundreds of training sessions to various groups of employees. She also trained supervisors, developed programs and policies, and ensured continuing compliance with an array of employment laws.

She recently presented an informative submission on this topic; excerpts are as follows:
Why should care?

- \$300 billion price tag, PER YEAR
 - Turnover (including costs associated with recruitment, interviewing, hiring)
 - Absenteeism/lost productivity
 - Workers' compensation
 - Disability insurance
- Much like sexual harassment at work was first identified as an unacceptable problem and then codified into law, it looks like bullying is on a similar path
- Bullying behaviors are difficult to change
- When a company can show they've provided anti-bullying training, they may be able to decrease their liability in a harassment or discrimination lawsuit!
- Typical displays can include any of the following; verbal abuse, threatening public behaviors/actions, abuse of authority, interference with work performance and destruction of workplace relationships.

Typical “Boss bullying” behaviours may include:

- Deceit: lying, giving false or misleading information through acts of omission or commission;
- Constraint: restricting subordinates' activities in domains outside of work
- Coercion: threatening excessive or inappropriate harm for noncompliance with a boss's wishes
- They may also display selfishness, cruelty and/or disregard

Jamie suggests bullying may not be an “either-or” phenomenon, but rather a gradually evolving process including five stages:

- (1) Conflict – a critical incident
- (2) Aggressive Acts – aggressive acts & psychological assaults that set bullying

dynamics in motion

- (3) Management Involvement – involves management in the negative cycle through its misjudgment of the situation
- (4) Branding the Target – brands targets as “difficult” or “mentally ill” people.
- (5) Expulsion – target leaves the organization, either voluntarily or by forced resignation or termination

Bullies maybe those who:

- suffer from low self-esteem yet belittle their targets
- are self-interested and vindictive, often taking credit for others’ work & never taking responsibility for their own mistakes
- are all about power and protecting their turf

Who are the victims or targets?

- They’re often agreeable, vulnerable, and successful co-workers, often motivated by the bullies’ own feelings of inadequacy
- The abuser most often controls some important resource(s) in the target’s life, so the target is dependent on the bully

How does it affect others in the organization? With an atmosphere of fear & mistrust, other employees who witness bullying may experience feelings of helplessness, frustration, lack of control, as well as anger at the organization for not dealing with the bully’s behavior.

How can one differentiate between a tough boss vs. workplace bully?

A tough boss is objective and fair, self-controlled without displaying emotion and results and organization-oriented. A workplace bully misuses power and authority, is personally-focused and self-interested, is subject to emotional outbursts, and their actions are perceived as inconsistent and unfair.

Circumstances that allow bullying to pervade an environment may include:

Employee frustration

- Lack of training
- Organization chaos
- Lack of comprehensive policies
- Inadequate “checks & balances”
- Misuse of power and authority
- Poor management
- Type of industry
- Lack of communication

What can an organization do?

- Zero-tolerance, starting with the top
- Create an anti-bullying policy
- Clear expectations/accountability/consistency
- Frequent employee communication
- Approachable HR professionals and management team
- A defined disciplinary process
- Promote a culture of trust & respect
- Training
- 360 degree performance feedback
- Establish multiple avenues of conflict resolution

- Confidential way for employees to report problems
- Fair and thorough investigations
- Quick action to resolve disputes
- Periodic employee opinion surveys
- Exit interviews
- Create a safe and respectful culture

If you're the bullying target, several alternatives are possible:

Drs. Gary and Ruth Namie suggest:

- Solicit support from family & friends
- Consult a physician or therapist
- Solicit witness statements
- Confront the bully
- File an internal complaint
- Prepare the case against the bully
- Present the case to senior management
- Take the case public

If you represent the company:

- Confront & monitor existing bullies
- Ensure management demonstrates a commitment to a bully-free environment
- Develop an anti-bullying policy (include steps to address problems)
- Investigation and complaint resolution systems in place, effective disciplinary procedures, follow up measures
- Periodic (and regular) training about conduct expectations

Though bullying is not illegal, it often leads to harassment and discrimination, which ARE illegal. Bullied individuals may claim the Intentional Infliction of Emotional Distress (IIED), addressed by the Healthy Workplace Bill introduced in more than 20 states since 2003 and adopted in 11 states.

If you have additional questions, please contact Jamie Sagehorn at 620-687-2177 or

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Jamie is on her local Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) Board of Directors as the Legislative Liaison. She is also a member of SHRM's national Advocacy team, which monitors employment law policy and lobbies legislators at the federal level.