

Stop Workplace Bullying

It's not normal — it's unreasonable.

Workplace Bullying and Disruptive Behavior:

What Everyone Needs to Know

What is workplace bullying and who is affected?

Workplace bullying refers to *repeated*, unreasonable actions of individuals (or a group) directed towards an employee (or a group of employees), which are intended to intimidate, degrade, humiliate, or undermine; or which create a risk to the health or safety of the employee(s).

Workplace bullying often involves an abuse or misuse of power. Bullying behavior creates feelings of defenselessness and injustice in the target and undermines an individual's right to dignity at work. Bullying is different from aggression. Whereas aggression may involve a single act, bullying involves repeated attacks against the target, creating an *on-going pattern* of behavior. "Tough" or "demanding" bosses are not necessarily bullies as long as they are respectful and fair and their primary motivation is to obtain the best performance by setting high yet reasonable expectations for working safely. Workplace bullying can be instigated by coworkers, supervisors or contract workers.

Some bullying situations involve employees bullying their peers, rather than a supervisor bullying an employee. The term mobbing refers to a group of coworkers targeting another worker. Supervisors should intervene immediately to address and stop mobbing behaviors.

Examples of bullying:

- Unwarranted or invalid criticism
- Blame without factual justification
- Being treated differently than the rest of your work group
- Being sworn at
- Exclusion or social isolation
- Being shouted at or being humiliated
- Excessive monitoring or micro-managing
- Being given work unrealistic deadlines

How bullying affects people:

Targets of bullying experience significant physical and mental health problems.

- Reduced self-esteem
- Musculoskeletal problems
- Work withdrawal and sickness absence
- Sleep and digestive disturbances
- Increased depression/self-blame
- Family tension and stress
- High stress, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Financial problems due to absence

How bullying affects organizations:

Each of the individual consequences listed above can be very costly for the school system. Costs of bullying general fall into three categories:

1. Replacing staff members that leave as a result of being bullied, cost of training new employees.
2. Work effort being displaced as staff cope with bullying incidents (i.e., effort being directed away from work productivity and towards coping).
3. Costs associated with investigations of ill treatment, potential legal action and loss of school reputation. Bullies do not run good organizations; staff turnover and sick leave will be high while morale and productivity will be low. Stress, depression and physical health problems result in time away from work that is costly in terms of workers' compensation and lost productivity. The health problems experienced by targets of bullying result in a sense of helplessness and negative emotional states. Low self-esteem and a negative school climate suppress creativity and hamper employee's abilities to respond to difficult situations or challenging goals.

Bullying is different from harassment

Harassment is one type of illegal discrimination and is defined as offensive and unwelcome conduct, serious enough to adversely affect the terms and conditions of a person's employment, which occurs because of the person's protected class, and can be imputed to the employer. Protected classes in employment are race/color, creed (religion), national origin, sex, marital status, disability, HIV/AIDS or Hepatitis C status, sexual orientation/gender identity, and honorably discharged veteran and military status.

An example of *harassment* could be when an employee tells racist jokes and refers to a particular co-worker or group of co-workers by using racial slurs, and after a complaint, the employer does nothing to stop the behavior. Another example of *harassment* could be a male principal who makes unwelcome sexual suggestions to a female employee and touches her inappropriately. Bullying also differs from *retaliation*, which occurs after a person makes a complaint of illegal

discrimination, and is then the subject of an adverse employment action or subjected to harassment because he or she made the complaint.

Bullying, on the other hand, is often directed at someone a bully feels threatened by. The target often doesn't even realize when they are being bullied because the behavior is covert, through trivial criticisms and isolating actions that occur behind closed doors. While harassment is illegal, bullying in the workplace is not.

What can be done about bullying?

At the first sign of conflict check if your district has a workplace violence program or a code of conduct that addresses psychological intimidation and aggression that is not based on a protected characteristic. It can be useful to talk to the aggressor if you are comfortable with that. The person may deny the aggression, but you have let them know that you are aware and consider it unprofessional. Or talk with someone you absolutely trust in the workplace that can advise you and advocate for you while keeping your situation confidential.

What can you do about bullying?

Employees — regain control:

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- Recognize that you are being bullied.
- Realize that you are NOT the source of the problem
- Recognize that bullying is about control, and therefore has nothing to do with your performance.

Take action:

- Keep a diary detailing the nature of the bullying (e.g., dates, times, places, what was said or done and who was present).
- Obtain copies of harassing / bullying paper trails; hold onto copies of documents that contradict the bully's accusations against you (e.g., time sheets etc.)

Other actions:

- Expect the bully to deny and perhaps misconstrue your accusations; have a witness with you during any meetings with the bully; report the behavior to an appropriate person.
- Contact the Washington State Employee Assistance Program, (www.hr.wa.gov/EAP) for guidance on dealing with the issue.

Employers:

- Pine Bluff School District has created a zero tolerance anti-bullying policy. The policy is committed to a safe and healthful working environment and has the full support of top management.
- When witnessed or reported, the bullying behavior will be addressed IMMEDIATELY.
- If bullying is entrenched in the school system, complaints will be taken seriously and investigated promptly. Reassignment of the bully may be necessary.

- The district will structure the work environment to incorporate a sense of autonomy, individual challenge/mastery, and clarity of task expectations for employees.
- Include employees in decision-making processes.
- Hold awareness campaigns for EVERYONE on what bullying is. Encourage reporting.
- Ensure that the Administrative Staff/Principals has an active part in the staff they supervise, rather than being far removed from them.
- Encourage open door policies.
- Investigate the extent and nature of the problem.
- Conduct employee attitude surveys.
- Improve administrative staff ability and sensitivity towards dealing with and responding to conflicts.
- Establish an independent contact for employees (e.g., Human Resources contact).

If you believe that you are being harassed or retaliated against for making a discrimination complaint, you should immediately contact the Washington State Human Rights Commission (1-800-233-3247, www.hum.wa.gov).

For additional information: Contact Employee Relations
4815 W. Markham Street
Little Rock, AR 72205
501-280-4099