

Bullying at work: another form of workplace violence

In the *FOCUS* article "[Workplace violence: a challenge for employers](#)", we observed that case law demonstrates that violence means more than just physical violence and includes threats, coercion and emotional abuse. Bullying is one such form of non-physical violence; and it is beginning to gain more attention as a serious workplace issue. Linked to the concept of harassment, bullying is different in that it may not involve discrimination on prohibited grounds, such as race or gender. In extreme cases, bullying of employees can have catastrophic consequences, such as in the case of the Ottawa-Carleton Regional Transit Commission (OC Transpo), where an employee who had been taunted and teased about his speech impediment lashed out by murdering four co-workers. The OC Transpo incident highlights the fact that any effective anti-violence strategy must also target the bullying which can result in physical violence - whether by the victim or the perpetrator of the bullying. However, even if physical violence never occurs, when bullying reaches the point of being a pattern of conduct, it can create a toxic workplace and liability for the employer, just as in cases of harassment or physical violence.

According to one source in the U.S., bullying affects one in six workers and is more common than either racial or sexual harassment. In over 80 per cent of the cases, the bully is in a supervisory role vis-à-vis the victim.

Besides the obvious forms of bullying, such as verbal abuse, threats, taunting and intimidation, other examples of this type of conduct include

- spreading malicious rumors about the victim and making false allegations in company documents;
- undermining or hindering the victim's work by, for example, giving the victim wrong information or withholding necessary information;
- constantly changing guidelines and expectations applicable to the victim;
- removing responsibilities from the victim and making the victim feel useless;
- blocking the victim's applications for leave, training or promotion;
- assigning unreasonable duties to the victim;
- constantly and persistently criticizing the victim's work.

It can be seen from these examples that it is not always easy to determine whether someone is being bullied or is merely being subjected to "strong management" or justifiable criticism. Many bullies are skillful at covering their tracks and ingratiating themselves with their superiors. In other cases, what appears to be bullying conduct may be more properly characterized as a persistent personality clash between two employees.

However, it is important to an organization's health to root out bullying behavior, as the effect on employee morale can be costly. Victims of bullying are very often competent, dedicated employees who are valued by their colleagues. Rather than being weak and socially isolated, the typical victim is equally likely to be a cooperative individual with a non-confrontational personal style. Often, the victim may have thrived in the workplace for a period of years, before the arrival of a new supervisor changed everything.

Source: <http://www.emond-harnden.com/feb03/bullies.html>