

healthy interactions

RESOLVING INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT



HEALTHY INTERACTIONS PROGRAM NEWSLETTER FOR EDUCATORS

Understanding Workplace Bullying and Mobbing

Conflicts occur in any busy work environment and that includes schools. In many schools, conflicts are typically settled when individuals commit to resolving differences using an approach such as Healthy Interactions. Interest-based conflict skills help people shrink conflict and develop action plans for satisfactory resolution of the problem.

In some school environments, however, a less positive dynamic

exists. Sometimes members of a staff feel like they are subjected to harsh or devastating treatment by their colleagues. They suffer emotional and sometimes physical distress as a result. Many of these people contact Member Services seeking support, advice, mediation and/or legal remedies.

In order to correct and prevent bullying in the workplace, we need to understand unresolved conflict and its



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potential to lead to complicating factors such as bullying and mobbing.

In her 2007 book, *The Complete Guide to Understanding, Controlling, and Stopping Bullies & Bullying at Work*, Margaret Kohut states that victims who are the target of demeaning and destructive acts can have their careers destroyed. The consequences can be devastating, up to and including attempts of suicide. According to Kohut, workplace bullying leads to a deterioration in a person's "physical and psychological being" and leads to "depression, gastric problems, headaches, insomnia, substance abuse, and a host of medical ailments." Bullying damages self-esteem and confidence and, she adds, "Bullying is a draining force that consumes the total person on a holistic level" (p 14).

The Workplace Bullying Institute (www.workplacebullying.org) conducted a survey in the US in

2010 on the topic of workplace bullying. Some key findings are interesting:

- 35 per cent of workers have experienced bullying firsthand.
- 62 per cent of bullies are men.
- Women bullies target women in 80 per cent of cases.
- The majority of bullying is same-gender harassment.

Gary Namie (2000) provides the following interesting facts in his research study on workplace bullying:

- Women comprise 50 per cent of the bullies.
- Female bullies target women an overwhelming 84 per cent of the time; male bullies target women in 69 per cent of the cases; women are the majority (77 per cent) of targets.
- Nearly all bullies are bosses (81 per cent)

Bullying is a health hazard to the person targeted:

- 41 per cent were diagnosed with depression.
- More than 80 per cent reported effects that prevented them from



being productive at work (severe anxiety, lost concentration, sleeplessness, etc).

- PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) symptoms afflict 31 per cent of the women and 21 per cent of the men
- Support for targets came from spouses, partners and outside friends. Coworkers, the bullies' bosses and human resources failed to support the targeted person despite requests for help. In fact, in only 7 per cent of cases was the bully punished, transferred or terminated.

Bullying costs jobs and livelihood:

- Of the survey respondents for whom the bullying has stopped, 82 per cent lost their jobs (44 per cent involuntarily; 38 per cent voluntarily).
- In the aftermath, 51 per cent lost all or part of their income as a result; 33 per cent had no change.
- Thoughts linger: 79 per cent of targets frequently or constantly think about the past bullying.

(Study available at www.workplacebullying.org.)

In their book *The Bully at Work*, Namie and Namie discuss the behaviours and characteristics of a workplace bully (cited in Kohut, 2007, 35). They include, among other things, a dishonest or





disingenuous style of dealing with people and issues, the playing of favourites among employees, denying access to resources, encouraging coworkers of the target to provide damning evidence against the individual, using half-truths or lies, threatening the target, assigning punishing tasks, making nasty or hostile remarks to the target, putting on a face when others are around, breaching the target's confidentiality, inappropriately sharing information with coworkers or other bosses and creating a gotcha file kept under lock and key.

According to Kohut (2007), personality disorders are typically precursors to workplace bullying although not all bullies have a

disorder. Some are just mean-spirited people. Treatment of personality disorders is seldom successful. Kohut states, "Personality disordered individuals are in deep denial that they are the problem. To them, other people are the problem, and it is these others who need to change, not them" (37).

Bullies do not target everyone. They tend to target those who are vulnerable. According to Namie and Namie (cited in Kohut, 121), there are four reasons a bully targets an individual, including the target refusing to be subservient or over-controlled, the bully envying the target's superior competence, the bully envying the target's social skills or positive attitude, and the

target being an ethical whistleblower.

Mobbing is a type of workplace bullying that is far more devastating, described by Davenport et al (2002) as an emotional abuse. According to Davenport, the target of mobbing often goes on sick leave to escape and many become depressed. The person typically decides to leave his or her profession or retires early even when he/she can't afford it. Some attempt suicide.

Leymann (cited in Kohut, 2007, 171) identified five phases of mobbing in the following progression:

1. Conflict
2. Aggressive acts
3. Management involvement
4. Branding as difficult or mentally ill
5. Expulsion from the workplace

Although conflict in itself is not mobbing, it can be the first step of mobbing if the employee becomes a target as a result of an unresolved conflict. Management can either halt the hostilities or join the mob by beginning or enhancing the isolation of the employee. According to Leymann, phase 4 is crucial in the development of mobbing because now the target is labelled as difficult or mentally ill; this serves to seriously escalate the bullying behaviours toward the target. According to Leymann, this

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IMPORTANT DATES

JAN 16-19, 2012
Healthy Interactions
Facilitator Training
4-day Workshop
Calgary

NOTE: Understanding
Conflict to be offered at
some Teachers'
Conventions

AUG 20-21, 2012
Understanding Conflict
2-day Workshop
Edmonton

AUG 20-23, 2012
Healthy Interactions
Facilitator Training
4-day Workshop
Edmonton

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phase almost always leads to expulsion from the workplace (Kohut, 2007, 171).

Victims of mobbing don't often stay at the job. Most leave. Grim statistics are shared by Namie (2000):

- 11 per cent transferred but were still employed by same employer.
- 38 per cent left to stop further health damage.
- 44 per cent were terminated.

"The kiss of death for those targets who attempt to become bully-busters occurs when the bully has support all the way to the top of the organization; targets that face unanimous opposition have no chance of support" (Namie and Namie cited in Kohut, 194).

In their book, *Bullies, Tyrants and Impossible People*, Shapiro and Jankowski (2005) discuss their system for dealing with bullies. They believe that returning meanness with

meanness accomplishes very little and that the likelihood of persuading a bully that he or she is mistaken about the target's worth is very unlikely. They outline a plan that they say has a greater chance of success. The book may be a worthwhile read for people who are experiencing bullying issues in the workplace. Other resources can be found at www.workplacebullying.org.

Other than reading and becoming informed about your district's policies, what should a target of bullying do? The first step would be to contact Member Services and discuss the situation with a staff officer. Some situations may be remedied using a conflict resolution or mediation approach such as Healthy Interactions or the Staff Relations Service (SRS). Information regarding SRS is available online at www.teachers.ab.ca. More egregious or intractable situations may require a conflict management

approach that could involve legal remedies. All calls to Member Services are confidential and no action will be taken on a member's behalf without his or her consent.

References

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