

# Bullying in the Workplace is Inappropriate, Counterproductive and Simply Wrong!

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Over the past several years, we as a society have witnessed a decline in civility, a normalization of all kinds of harassment, a tendency toward vilification of those who are not like us, and a steep increase in bullying – even in politics. Name calling, retaliation and attempts to discredit or attack our perceived adversaries is now commonplace.

In corporate America, bullying behavior takes place every day. In fact, men and women in Leadership roles sometimes use their power to abuse and mistreat employees who often have few choices but to accept it and hope that it is a one-time occurrence.

The impact from bullying behavior is not just felt by the victims themselves. It can also impede creativity, reduce overall productivity, create a toxic company culture and place the organization at risk of costly litigation for failing to properly address the issue.

Ironically, October is **National Bullying Prevention Month**. An organization called PACER (Parent Advocacy Coalition for Educational Rights) initiated this effort back in 2006 to raise awareness about bullying and the role we all play in eradicating this abhorrent behavior from our schools, communities and workplaces.

## What is meant by bullying?

Merriam-Webster defines bullying as “abuse and mistreatment of someone vulnerable by someone stronger, or more powerful.”

In the workplace, there are many examples of behavior that fit the definition of bullying, including the following:

- Being constantly criticized by your manager or co-workers
- Belittling comments made during meetings or conference calls
- Being yelled at by your manager in front of your co-workers
- Being purposely excluded from high-profile projects or important meetings
- Being falsely accused of making mistakes or not submitting your work product by the deadline

Although there is no federal law that prohibits workplace bullying, many states have enacted anti-bullying legislation aimed at eliminating bullying in our schools. These statutes typically define specific behaviors that constitute bullying and authorize school officials to take appropriate action to prevent or stop it. Similar legislation (called healthy workplace bills) have been proposed in several states, but have not yet become law. However, federal statutes such as civil rights and non-discrimination laws may be relevant based upon the type and severity of the bullying allegations.

### **Why do people bully others in the workplace?**

Most of us learned in elementary school that name calling, bullying and harassment are inappropriate and wrong. Others of us have not yet learned the basic principles of how to treat people with dignity and respect.

Experts who have studied bullying behavior suggest that there are many reasons why people utilize bullying techniques in the workplace. Chief among them are the following:

- To overcome feelings of inferiority or to undermine the achievements of other employees who succeed from hard work, creativity and superior talent
- To attack others who are more popular or more well-liked in the office
- To achieve control and enhance the ability to give orders to those whom they manage or direct
- To antagonize people of a certain age, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual preference or religion because of stereotypes or deep-rooted prejudices
- To take advantage of people they perceive to be weak or “easy targets”
- To promote or advance their careers and personal agendas

### **What can we do to prevent bullying?**

Not surprisingly, most firms today “outlaw” this behavior in the formal Code of Conduct document that new employees are required to acknowledge and sign as a condition of employment. The best firms also employ other tactics to reduce or eliminate bullying behavior from their corporate culture, including the following:

- They establish a zero tolerance for bullying in their workplace, and create an anti-bullying policy that applies to all employees, regardless of their role or position
- They conduct regular training for all of their associates to ensure employees are aware of the nature of workplace bullying, how to recognize it, and what to do about it
- They create a framework for reporting alleged bullying behavior that protects the identity of the person making the report, and prevents potential retaliation against accusers
- They respond quickly and decisively to all reports of bullying and conduct a thorough investigation to determine the facts and an appropriate response
- They ensure that this topic is constantly discussed and communicated so that no one can claim ignorance of the conduct that is expected on the part of all employees

Despite these proactive approaches for addressing bullying, it has been my experience (and the experience of most people I talk with) that this type of behavior persists in most organizations. According to the **Workplace Bullying InSTITUTE**, nearly 30 percent of all employees will experience bullying during their careers. I personally have worked for both men and women managers who consider bullying tactics to be part of their management toolkit, and routinely use bullying as a weapon to achieve their individual goals and objectives.

In conclusion, while it is clear that some progress has been made to achieve “bully-free” work environments, there is much more work to be done in order to rid our workplaces of this recurring issue. All of us have a role to play in addressing this pervasive problem so that employees can direct their energy toward productive work initiatives instead of fearing bullying tactics from their managers or co-workers. In light of the above, what steps can each of us take to create a more civil, positive, safe environment that respects the dignity of all employees?