

Workplace Bullying Effects on Employees and Organizations

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Abstract

Workplace bullying is repeated or persistent behavior that humiliates, intimidates, undermines, isolates, or otherwise harms a worker who has difficulty defending against it. It differs from a single disagreement, legitimate performance management, and ordinary workplace conflict, although those situations can become bullying when power is misused and harmful conduct becomes systematic. This essay examines the effects of bullying on employee health, job satisfaction, absenteeism, turnover, team learning, productivity, organizational reputation, and legal risk. Research consistently associates exposure to bullying with psychological distress, sleep problems, burnout, reduced commitment, and intentions to leave. Harm also extends to witnesses and teams, creating silence, distrust, and reduced willingness to report mistakes. Effective prevention requires more than a written policy. Organizations need respectful leadership, psychologically safe reporting channels, prompt and impartial investigation, protection from retaliation, fair performance-management systems, manager training, and regular evaluation of psychosocial risks. The goal is not to eliminate disagreement but to ensure that conflict is addressed without humiliation, coercion, or abuse of power.

Keywords: workplace bullying, employee well-being, psychological safety, organizational culture, harassment, conflict management

Introduction

Workplace bullying is an organizational problem rather than merely a clash between difficult personalities. It emerges when repeated negative behavior is tolerated, rewarded, ignored, or inadequately addressed. Examples may include public humiliation, persistent ridicule, social exclusion, deliberate withholding of information, impossible deadlines, threats, malicious rumors, repeated interruption, sabotage of work, or misuse of disciplinary processes.

Not every unpleasant interaction is bullying. Managers must be able to set expectations, correct errors, allocate work, and conduct performance reviews. Employees may also disagree strongly without engaging in abuse. The distinction lies in the pattern, power imbalance, method, context, and effect of the conduct. Constructive management focuses on work, evidence, and improvement. Bullying attacks dignity, creates fear, or deliberately weakens a person's ability to perform.

Defining Workplace Bullying

Researchers commonly describe workplace bullying as repeated exposure to negative acts over time in circumstances where the target finds it difficult to defend against them. The concept therefore contains three important elements: repetition, harm, and power imbalance. Power can arise from formal authority, control of information, social alliances, professional status, or influence over schedules and opportunities.

Bullying may be vertical, horizontal, or upward. Supervisors may bully subordinates, colleagues may target one another, and groups of employees may direct hostile behavior toward a manager. Customers, clients, patients, contractors, and other third parties can also create workplace bullying risks.

Bullying and unlawful harassment overlap but are not identical. In many jurisdictions, harassment becomes unlawful when it is connected to a protected characteristic such as race, religion, sex, disability, age, or national origin, or when it involves retaliation for protected activity. Bullying can be harmful even when it does not satisfy a specific legal definition. Organizations should therefore avoid limiting intervention to conduct that creates immediate legal liability.

Effects on Mental and Physical Health

Systematic reviews associate workplace bullying with anxiety, depression, psychological distress, emotional exhaustion, sleep disturbance, and symptoms of post-traumatic stress. Prolonged exposure can alter how a person experiences the workplace, making ordinary interactions feel unpredictable or dangerous. Employees may become hypervigilant, withdraw from colleagues, or repeatedly review communications for signs of threat.

Physical consequences may include headaches, gastrointestinal problems, fatigue, elevated stress responses, and worsening of existing conditions. These effects do not prove that every symptom was caused solely by workplace conduct, but they demonstrate why organizations should treat bullying as a psychosocial health risk.

The target may also experience shame and self-doubt, particularly when the behavior is subtle or denied. When complaints are dismissed as oversensitivity, the organization can compound the original harm.

Effects on Job Performance

Bullying consumes attention. A worker who is anticipating humiliation or documenting incidents has fewer cognitive resources available for problem solving, customer service, and creative work. Fear

may discourage employees from asking questions, admitting uncertainty, or proposing new ideas.

Performance can decline even when the target remains physically present. This phenomenon is sometimes described as presenteeism. Employees attend work but operate below their normal capacity because of distress, reduced concentration, or avoidance of particular people.

Bullying can also manufacture the appearance of poor performance. A target may be denied information, excluded from meetings, assigned conflicting priorities, or given unrealistic deadlines. Organizations must therefore investigate the work environment rather than assuming that declining output confirms negative claims about the employee.

Absenteeism and Turnover

Employees may take sick leave to recover from stress or avoid contact with the person responsible. Repeated absence increases workload for colleagues and may reinforce managerial frustration if the underlying cause is not recognized.

Many targets eventually resign, transfer, reduce their hours, or leave their profession. Turnover creates recruitment, onboarding, training, and productivity costs. The organization also loses institutional knowledge and may develop a reputation that makes future recruitment difficult.

The person causing harm may remain because senior leaders value technical results, revenue, status, or personal loyalty. Retaining a high-performing bully can be costly when the individual's apparent contribution depends on transferring hidden costs to other employees.

Effects on Teams and Witnesses

Witnesses learn from how leaders respond. When harmful conduct goes unchallenged, employees may conclude that reporting is unsafe or that results matter more than respectful behavior. They may remain silent about errors, risks, misconduct, or emerging problems.

Psychological safety refers to a shared belief that people can raise questions, admit mistakes, and offer ideas without interpersonal punishment. Bullying undermines this climate. Teams with low psychological safety may hide information, avoid experimentation, and make poorer decisions.

Witnesses can also experience guilt, anxiety, and fear that they will become the next target. Informal alliances may form around the person with power, fragmenting the team and normalizing exclusion.

Organizational Culture and Leadership

Bullying is more likely to persist when expectations are ambiguous, workloads are excessive, competition is unmanaged, reporting channels lack credibility, and leaders model aggressive behavior. Restructuring, job insecurity, and poorly managed change can increase risk by intensifying power struggles.

Leadership behavior is therefore central to prevention. Managers should challenge disrespectful conduct regardless of the status or performance of the person responsible. They should communicate decisions, provide fair feedback, and avoid using humiliation as motivation.

Respect does not require leaders to avoid difficult conversations. Effective managers describe the performance issue, explain the evidence and impact, hear the employee's perspective, establish realistic expectations, and document agreed actions. This approach is more defensible and effective than personal criticism.

Legal and Ethical Responsibilities

The legal treatment of workplace bullying differs across countries and jurisdictions. Conduct may trigger occupational health and safety, antidiscrimination, employment, whistleblower, disability, workers' compensation, or criminal law depending on the facts. The International Labour Organization's Violence and Harassment Convention recognizes a right to a world of work free from violence and harassment.

Even when a specific anti-bullying statute does not apply, organizations have ethical duties to protect dignity, provide safe systems of work, and investigate credible concerns. A purely legalistic approach can encourage leaders to tolerate harmful conduct until it becomes severe enough for litigation.

Creating an Effective Policy

A workplace bullying policy should define prohibited behavior, distinguish legitimate management, provide examples, identify reporting options, prohibit retaliation, describe investigation procedures, and explain possible outcomes. The policy should apply to employees, managers, contractors, customers, and online communication.

Employees need more than one reporting route because the direct supervisor may be involved. Options may include human resources, a senior manager, an ethics office, a union representative, or an independent hotline. Accessibility, confidentiality limits, and emergency procedures should be clear.

Policies should not promise complete confidentiality when a fair investigation requires disclosure.

They should instead explain that information will be shared only with people who need it.

Investigation and Procedural Fairness

Complaints require prompt, impartial, and proportionate review. The investigator should identify allegations, interview relevant people, preserve documents, assess patterns, consider context, and provide both parties an opportunity to respond. Conclusions should be based on evidence rather than popularity or seniority.

Interim measures may be necessary to protect safety and integrity, but they should not presume guilt. Possible measures include reporting-line changes, remote work, schedule separation, or instructions concerning contact.

Organizations should distinguish substantiated misconduct from unproven allegations while recognizing that insufficient evidence does not necessarily mean a complaint was malicious. Retaliation, including exclusion, reduced opportunities, threats, or hostile references, should be monitored.

Prevention Through Work Design

Prevention should address organizational conditions as well as individual behavior. Clear roles, manageable workloads, fair promotion systems, transparent decision making, and sufficient staffing reduce opportunities for arbitrary power. Regular psychosocial-risk assessments can identify teams with high turnover, sickness absence, complaints, or low trust.

Training should help managers recognize subtle behaviors, conduct respectful performance discussions, respond to disclosures, and manage conflict early. Generic online training is unlikely to change culture without visible leadership accountability.

Teams also benefit from agreed communication norms, structured meetings, documented responsibilities, and methods for challenging decisions. Related approaches are discussed in [communication teamwork and leadership skills in the workplace](#) and [conflict management styles and group decision making](#).

Supporting Affected Employees

Support may include access to healthcare, employee assistance, union advice, workplace adjustments, leave, coaching, or facilitated return to work. Support services should not be used to imply that the target must become more resilient while the harmful environment remains unchanged.

Managers should ask what practical measures would improve safety and participation. Employees

should receive updates about the process where possible and be protected from unnecessary repetition of distressing accounts.

Measuring Organizational Progress

Organizations should evaluate whether prevention measures work. Relevant indicators include complaint handling time, repeat allegations, turnover, sickness absence, employee survey responses, trust in reporting, psychological safety, and representation in promotion or discipline. A decline in complaints is not automatically evidence of success; it may indicate fear or loss of trust.

Qualitative information is also important. Exit interviews, focus groups, and independent reviews can reveal patterns that formal reports miss. Results should lead to specific actions, responsible owners, and follow-up dates.

Conclusion

Workplace bullying damages health, performance, retention, teamwork, and organizational trust. Its costs extend beyond the individual target to witnesses, customers, and the institution's ability to learn from mistakes. The problem cannot be solved through slogans or a policy that is ignored when a powerful employee is involved.

Effective prevention combines respectful leadership, clear expectations, psychologically safe reporting, impartial investigation, fair work design, and measurable accountability. Organizations should preserve legitimate performance management and robust debate while drawing a firm boundary against repeated humiliation, intimidation, exclusion, and abuse of power.

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