

7 Steps to a Bully-Free Workplace:

Deliver a culture of civility to your organization & sustain the positive change



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American businesses spend \$5 to \$6 million per year on workplace bullying according to the Bureau of National Affairs. Bottom lines all across America suffer as a result of high absenteeism and turnover, declined mental and physical health, reduced productivity, internal communication breakdown, and a resulting bad reputation in the community.

Although studies all around the world continue to indicate approximately 70% of employees report they have been bullied, relatively little advice is available to organizational practitioners attempting to resolve the issue within the walls of their own companies.

In response, I offer seven fundamental steps to implement a bully-free workplace – and whether your organization has 10 employees or 10,000 – they work.

But let's start with ensuring we have a full grasp of the problem.

Bullying is unwanted and recurring negative and abusive acts aimed at one or more individual. Attacks involve perceived power imbalance on the part of the victim(s) and inability to engage in self-defense, which result in psychological harm to the victim(s) and ultimately monetary losses to the organization. Targets experience an array of damaging consequences including distress, humiliation, anger, anxiety, discouragement, hopelessness, depression, burnout, and lower job satisfaction. Targets and observers of the behavior also feel lack of support from management as their leaders often do nothing to stop the harassment.

Bullies use an extended list of behaviors that include, but are certainly not limited to, silent treatment, impersonal interactions, aggressive communication style, excessive criticism, micromanagement, assigning

tasks above or below competence levels, giving impossible deadlines, punitive disciplinary actions, withholding information, and discouraging initiative.

Most corporate policies cover persecution aimed at protected classes (e.g., race, religion, sexual orientation) but do not cover bullying at all. Talking down to someone in a staff meeting or being rude during interactions “just because” is most often not covered in the office rules. Organizations are also much more likely to put a stop to sexual harassment simply because the law says they have to - but no laws exist against workplace bullying in the United States.

Bullying does not exist in a vacuum. It is not a simple case of a bad behaving employee whose behavior can be thwarted by implementing a corporate policy or passing a law. This behavior exists within an organization where organizational culture is the stage, and organizational members are “players upon it” as Shakespeare might say.

Organizational culture is the way an organization’s members as a whole think, act, and understand the organizational world around them, or simply, “the way it is.” Culture comes to be and exists within communication among members and lies within an organization’s vocabulary, stories, traditions, structure, processes and communication networks.

Stories told by organizational members convey values and history, while solidifying bonds between employees and the organization; unless of course the stories are about punishment, gossip, micromanagers and high stress environments. Rites and rituals, or traditions, lie in everyday organizational life and bring cultural ideology to the surface through occurrences such as Friday morning round tables where ideas may be openly shared. An informal organizational structure where subordinates can speak freely may be a catalyst for innovation, for example, while a bureaucratic one that emphasizes rules and policies may cause communication bottlenecks, stomp out free thinking and of course foster opportunities to bully others.

Bullying may seem permitted or natural to insiders in environments where establishing a pecking order or picking on a low performing team member is “normal.” Negative behaviors can also flourish in a work environment where a laissez-faire style of leadership or high internal competition exists; or when management fails to notice, chooses to ignore, or even participates in such behavior. These cultural mishaps not only foster opportunities to reward or ignore bullying, but also create a general acceptance of negativity - making it part of the organizational culture. Ambiguity in job responsibilities, roles and goals, and pertinent information contributing to an individual’s effectiveness can also feed into micro-politics, or employees taking it upon themselves to close informational gaps left open by the organization, perhaps with abusive measures.

Those prone to become a bully may also be motivated by an attempt to succeed, such that when bullies are perceived to be rewarded by monetary compensation, promotions, or some other recognition, others may follow suit. Additionally, stressful environments increase aggressive tendencies, particularly during periods of downsizing or restructure, increased competition, or when temperatures and crowding are allowed to rise to uncomfortable levels. Such events may provoke “taking it out” on others, grasping to make sense of it all, or tight (i.e., aggressive) holds on organizational responsibilities.

Seven Steps to a Bully-Free Workplace. Communication presents an opportunity to make deliberate culture shifts and can be used strategically to do so. Managers, leaders, executives, and the people in charge, whoever they are, by virtue of having the ability to create rules and policies, perform employee evaluations, lead staff meetings, dictate work load, and act as an organizational example and essentially an internal spokesperson, have the power to negotiate, strengthen and deliver a tactical culture to the workplace. And, executives must be transparent in their support of a healthy work environment.

Following are seven steps any manager or HR professional can follow as they move to deliver a healthy and civil culture to the organization.

1. Use internal communication strategically

Organizational success depends on a climate of fairness and supportiveness - where members are listening and being sensitive to one another's needs; and are aware of how comments might be perceived by others.

Leaders and management can use language to deliver a healthy workplace culture, and encourage open discussions and employee empowerment. Employees will make better decisions, together, regarding the common good of the company after having engaged with the perspectives of others and after having the opportunity to express their own views. Allowing employees to speak without restraint about their positions on internal current events ultimately influence their responses in a positive way.

Develop rituals that applaud interpersonal communication skills, empathy, conflict resolution and positive attitudes as a part of the routine, like the manager who encourages constructive criticism and optimistic attitudes with positive rewards.

Use the opportunity lying within corporate documents such as employee evaluations, policy handbooks, work instructions and emails to communicate the importance of mutual respect and encourage positivity. Place the expectation of appreciation and kindness in job descriptions and memos and discuss it during both formal and informal meetings. Require new hires to sign a "rules of engagement" document that includes rules like, "I will be a good person to work with-I will not be a jerk" and "I will manage my work relationships like I would manage my relationships with family and friends; with care, concern and kindness." And of course, generate and roll out an anti-bully corporate policy (see Step 4).

2. Obtain and maintain organizational commitment

Appreciate the value of internal relationships and their positive impact on the bottom line. Be willing to invest in employee individual success at all levels no matter title or responsibility, and in superior organizational performance from a people perspective.

Recognize that people create the competitive advantage and are assets to be invested in. Upset and absent workers contribute to loss in the bottom line, and unhappy employees produce unhappy work – with errors, poor quality, and reduced output. Obviously these mishaps cost the organization in wasted time, materials and resources.

3. Perform periodic audits of internal communication processes

Communication audits put an important perspective on things in that they magnify interactions that take place among people. Communication provides the framework for getting things done, and communication audits can discover potential areas for concern.

Among other things, audits offer a comprehensive review of communication patterns that provide information about the structure of the organization, effectiveness of communication, and employee loyalty. This facilitates strategic planning and learning the success with which internal information is conveyed, and of course detects whether some employees feel others are bullies (or bottlenecks, buck-passers, know-it-all's, chronic complainers). In addition, through interviews and ultimately implementation of some of the employee's ideas, audits are a useful way to develop participation and provide a vehicle for taking ownership in the organization - not to mention the simple act of performing an audit conveys intent to make changes.

Superior internal organizational communication drives commitment to the organization, employee engagement, job satisfaction, productivity, reduced absenteeism, increased retention, fewer strikes, financial stability, effectiveness of change implementation, increased levels of innovation, and a good reputation within the community and industry.

4. Roll out an anti-bully policy

An anti-workplace bully prevention policy must be implemented and include management's commitment to a healthy workplace, a definition of bullying, responsibilities for maintaining the policy, training, and a formal grievance procedure. The policy should also stress the importance of written documentation from all parties involved in any complaints; including target(s), bullies, witnesses and investigators. Of course, the policy is only as effective as management's commitment to it.

5. Conduct management and employee training

Establish training programs for all levels to occur during new hire training and at scheduled intervals thereafter. At the very least, training should remind employees and managers that they have a responsibility to contribute to achieving a healthy and civil work environment that does not tolerate bullying.

Training could also include all sorts of other skills such as conflict resolution, negotiation, interpersonal communication, assertiveness, empathy, stress management, leadership, optimism and self-examination. These are valuable skills that promote a healthy workplace. Expectations regarding proficiency in these areas should be tied to performance and career advancement and show up in employee goals and awards programs.

6. Take grievances seriously and investigate them immediately

When a grievance is filed, the complaining individual should present written documentation and precise details of each incident of bullying. This could include saved memos and emails, a factual journal of the behaviors including dates, times and witnesses, and if possible, written collaboration from witnesses. The complainant should be assured support and advised of the aims of the investigation and a likely time frame

for resolution. The person complained against should be notified in writing that an allegation of bullying has been made against him or her and guaranteed presumption of innocence until proven otherwise. Just like in any sexual harassment grievance, a thorough and objective investigation should occur immediately and be documented in writing. Be consistent in following the appropriate disciplinary procedures as laid out in the policy.

7. Use 360° reviews

Traditionally, employee reviews put managers into the position of high-powered judges, ostensibly telling employees if their work met company goals or not. The reviews trickle down from up above, with each person receiving a review from somebody higher than them. But raters may be careless or use appraisals for political reasons, and managers may vary in leniency and strictness leading relatively equal employees to receive vastly different marks. Of course, traditional reviews also provide the tyrannical manager a corporate-approved tool with which to keep pay and promotional opportunities repressed.

360° reviews provide each and every organizational member with reviews from everyone they work with including peers, managers, and subordinates; providing an avenue for managers to learn from the people they direct, rather than only those who direct them. Generally 360° reviews receive high employee involvement, have the strongest impact on behavior and performance, and greatly increase effective internal communication.

Bottom Line

Addressing workplace bullying and developing techniques to keep sustainable change means only good things will happen. A proactive approach to eradicating the behavior of bullying in your workplace can provide all sorts of benefits including reduced turnover, absenteeism, medical leaves, and costs associated with workers compensation and litigation. Healthy workplaces motivate and develop staff, minimize workplace politics, excel at internal communication processes and customer service, have better reputations, increase the quality and quantity of work product, reduce workplace stress, and overall have improved health in employees and the organization – to name just a few of the competitive advantages.

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