

Concerns about Bullying at Work As Heard by Organizational Ombudsmen¹

Publicity is widespread about bullying—in the workplace as well as in schools. Research shows that bullying is found to affect productivity, engagement, physical and emotional health—and also public perceptions of a school or workplace.²

We write as organizational ombuds practitioners who regularly hear about bullying. Organizational ombudsmen—all over the world—report at conferences and on listservs about this topic. People who come to ombuds offices frequently speak of “bullying” and “abuse of power” to describe actions and behavior of a colleague, teacher, mentor, customer, service provider, senior manager, patient, student, or subordinate.

Our observations may be of interest to everyone who works within an organization, and particularly to managers.

What do we hear in our offices about bullying?

People who are targeted seem to find it hard to comprehend how they find themselves in such a situation, especially when prior relationships have been collegial. People often say that they expected that they would be treated with respect and fairness on the job—that they would be physically and psychologically safe. People who have been subjected to prolonged, repeated, intensely negative behavior and mistreatment, frequently report health problems. Targets of bullying report recurrence of autoimmune disease, depression, anxiety attacks, gastro-intestinal disorders, trouble sleeping, migraines, PTSD, thoughts of revenge and sabotage and suicide. These health problems often adversely impact attendance, concentration and job performance.

We see—and hear from ombudsmen all over the world—that it often takes years before management will act on complaints. Targets of bullying may think that management is aware of the abuse and has not intervened—and that managers anyway would likely side with the more powerful party. These perceptions of management also can lead to under-reporting of problems in the institution.

Ombuds hear words like these to describe people perceived as bullies

- Bullies are described as unreasonably controlling, aggressive, impatient, volatile, temperamental, arbitrary, capricious, threatening, quick to retaliate—but we also hear that many bullies are “expert at managing up”.

¹ Please see <http://www.ombudsassociation.org/> for descriptions of the work of organizational ombudsmen, and for the professional Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics.

² See for example, Namie, Gary and Ruth Namie, *The Bully at Work*, Sourcebooks, Inc. 2 edition, June 1, 2009

Ombuds are told that the (alleged) bully may

- Not recognize his or her behavior and be unwilling to hear how others see him or her
- Express anger or irritation, and criticism, in an unacceptably unprofessional fashion, on an unpredictable basis—intimidating and threatening, verbally or physically
- Fly into tirades, slam doors, stand too close, raise a fist or throw objects and papers
- Disparage the target's intelligence, creativity, expertise and experience, mocking and humiliating a target in public and private
- Ask for ideas and opinions and then punish the target for speaking up
- Distort information between and among colleagues so that productive communications are exceedingly difficult
- Exclude the target from relevant sources of information, unreasonably forbid the target to talk to other staff, give too little information about the tasks at hand for the work to be done
- Give the target so much work that the work cannot reasonably be done on time—give assignments at the last minute, interrupt the orderly performance of assignments, or structure assignments that cannot be performed—and then accuse the target of not working hard enough
- Resent and challenge the target's successful relationships (work and personal), require personal work from the target or the target's spouse
- Make inappropriate comments about the target's personal, religious, or cultural life, refuse reasonable time off for religious observance or for other personal needs
- Share—or demand—detailed personal information, invading the privacy and dignity of others
- Show preferential treatment and favoritism toward some people; occasionally distract the target by offering opportunities and rewards that are unpredictably and painfully withdrawn
- Ask supervisees to ignore certain laws and regulations or stay away from compliance officers

(Alleged) targets commonly tell the ombuds that they

- Feel challenged, intimidated and “unsafe,” and are afraid of damaging or losing important relationships
- Feel anxious and constantly distracted about “the next outburst,” and are more likely to make errors
- Feel isolated from colleagues and support services
- Suffer stress, loss of self-confidence, and spend time and money on serious medical problems
- Have difficulty establishing, communicating and defending boundaries
- Rationalize and forgive the bully’s behavior

Experiences Reported by (Alleged) Targets

- I am afraid to go into her office. I try to avoid contact with her—it is hard to focus on my work.
- I don’t know what will set her off. I am not safe speaking in team meetings.
- I cannot please the head of my lab. He invades my cubicle and challenges me. I feel defenseless.
- I can’t concentrate—it is affecting my performance. I am worried he will withdraw my financial support (fire me).
- I am beginning to question my abilities—I wonder if I belong here—sometimes I believe I am worth nothing despite years of achievement and recognition.
- I am isolated—now I trust no one. Anyone I ask for help might tell my manager. No one will protect me from retaliation if I report this.
- Many people know this is going on and haven’t done anything.
- I am so angry I am afraid I may lose control.
- I have trouble sleeping, have migraines, and get sick before going to work. I needed to increase my medication.
- I can’t stop talking about this with my family—they are tired of hearing about it.
- I have done excellent work and love my job—but my only option is to leave.

Ideas for Employers

Many employers who hear about these matters will find bullying behaviors to be unethical and unacceptable. Since there has been substantial research about the effects of bullying³, employers may also be persuaded to take action by doing their own financial analysis of the effects of bullying. Employers might wish to compare their own estimates—of the health care costs, turnover costs, lost time, and legal costs that may be directly attributable to bullying in their specific organizations—to published research on the effects of bullying.

Ombudsmen often note that bullying may be a precursor or conjoined to other forms of unacceptable and illegal behavior. Relevant possibilities include making serious errors, and assault, theft, sexual and racial and religious harassment, ethics and safety violations, petty sabotage, and anonymous attacks on the Internet. Bullying also sometimes appears in ombudsman offices to be linked with supervisory incompetence. Employers might therefore wish to invest in coaching and training to raise awareness and management skills.

Employers might consider what would happen if serious bullying were to be (perhaps illegally) videotaped on a cell phone and posted anonymously to YouTube. Or if an account of the bullying were sent, with factual evidence and video, to the Congress, a major oversight agency or a major newspaper. Or if a group of targets became vengeful.

Employers should take notice of pending legislation about bullying. An employer might wish to add bullying definitions to its current harassment policies and procedures and training. (Some employers prefer separate policies.) A vital first step is to discuss—and post—the rules and standards that must be supported for a healthy workplace⁴. These standards should set the expectations and boundaries required at work regarding verbal and non-verbal behavior.

Regardless of any decision to write or not write new policy, we believe all employers should teach their managers and workers about the emotional and physical effects of bullying. Employers should provide coaching and support so that individuals will act effectively on their own to report or address unacceptable behavior. Management should identify and document unacceptable behavior and insure there are consequences if the behavior continues. The message to those who bully others should be that they must take responsibility for their actions and behave in a collegial fashion. The message to bystanders should be to consider if they can take effective action,⁵ and to be “active bystanders” if this is responsible and prudent. In our experience, bystanders who are influential in an organization may sometimes be able to stop powerful people who bully others

³ See for example, Daniel, Teresa A., *Stop Bullying at Work*, Society for Human Resource Management, September, 2009

⁴ See for example: <http://web.mit.edu/communications/hg/>

⁵ Rowe, Mary, “Bystander Training within Organizations,” in *The Journal of the International Ombudsman Association* 2009, 2,(1), online at <http://www.ombudsassociation.org/publications/journal/>

—by speaking up, and by modeling and teaching respectful behavior.

Employers should address complaints of bullying fairly—with regard to the rights of all who are involved—and in a timely manner. As a hospital may work to reduce errors and infections by use of multiple access reporting, and simple checklists, it may help for an employer to suggest where concerns might be reported—such a line supervisor, an ombuds office, human resources, a complaint line or the CEO—and what to say.

We believe employers should require all supervisors to work together with line and staff managers to create a culture—in every department—that affirms professional and respectful behavior and does not tolerate unacceptable behavior⁶.

⁶ See Rowe, Mary, "Micro-affirmations and Micro-inequities" in the Journal of the International Ombudsman Association 2008, 1,(1), on line at <http://www.ombudsassociation.org/publications/journal/>