How Female Employees

Are Bullied at Work

By

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When most people think of bullying, they immediately envision children bullying each other on the playground. Perhaps some reflect on their own bullying experiences as a targeted person, a bully, or a bystander who witnessed others being bullied. Very few people relate bullying to the workplace—unless of course, you are the unfortunate person being bullied by a boss or colleague. Bullies exist in our workplaces, just as they exist in our schools and playgrounds. Some childhood bullies have left the playgrounds, grown up, and are now bullying others in the workplace. They are wreaking havoc in the workplace and very little is being done to address this issue, especially in the US.

Fortunately for employees who live in a few Canadian provinces such as Ontario and Quebec, legislation has

been passed that addresses workplace bullying. Quebec was one of the first provinces to pass psychological harassment (workplace bullying) legislation. The province of Ontario recently passed legislation that addresses workplace violence and harassment, including workplace bullying, which goes into effect on June 15, 2010. It is time for the United States to follow suit and begin to protect their citizens from workplace bullies. It is time employers do what they can to stop workplace bullying in their organizations.

Workplace bullying has become epidemic. It is literally killing or severely incapacitating individuals who have fallen prey to the workplace bully. Workplace bullying is repetitive, abusive behavior that devalues and harms other people on the job. It is not usually physically violent but relies instead on the formidable weapons of hostile actions

and words. Workplace bullying intimidates and torments the targeted individual, putting his or her self-esteem and overall health at risk.

There has been an increase in the number of incidents involving workplace bullying and women. To explore the issue of workplace bullying as it pertains to women, research was conducted to determine the extent to which female employees in Canada and the United States are experiencing bullying behavior in their workplaces. Two hundred and sixty-three women from Canada and the United States completed an online *Workplace Interaction Survey*.

The *Workplace Interaction Survey* created by LMSB Consulting consisted of common bullying characteristics as outlined by researchers Charlotte Rayner and Helge Hoel

(1997). Rayner & Hoel categorized bullying behaviors as follows:

1) *Threat to Professional Status* (e.g., humiliating the person in public or sabotaging the person's work)

2) *Threat to Personal Standing* (e.g., name calling, spreading malicious rumors about a person, teasing or intimidating a person)

3) *Isolation* (e.g., preventing access to opportunities, or isolating the person physically or socially)

4) *Overwork* (e.g., imposing undue pressure to produce work and setting impossible deadlines)

5) *Destabilization* (e.g., failing to give credit where it is due, assigning meaningless tasks, removing responsibility or setting the person up for failure)

As it pertains to the category of threat to professional status, 45 percent of respondents indicated that they had

been publicly humiliated by a workplace bully, while 27 percent of respondents reported having their work sabotaged.

Respondents indicated that they had experienced behaviour that threatened their personal standing. The most common bullying behaviours experienced were: teasing (39 percent), malicious rumours (27 percent), and sarcasm (24 percent).

Regarding the categories of isolation and overwork, 32 percent of respondents were ostracized and 25 percent were denied promotions or other opportunities. The respondents further indicated that they experienced undue pressure to perform (47 percent) and were given unreasonable deadlines (22 percent). Destabilization was the final category of bullying behaviours considered. Of the

263 women completing the *Workplace Interaction Survey*, 51 percent indicated that they were not given credit for the work they had completed, 36 percent were not acknowledged or rewarded for their work, and 21 percent were assigned meaningless tasks.

At first glance, the bullying behaviours may appear to be innocuous; however, if experienced over an extended period of time, the behaviours can have a devastating effect on targeted individuals. They may seek to take out their frustration by harming themselves or others. Seven percent of women completing the *Workplace Interaction Survey* indicated that they had considered suicide or homicide as a result of how they were being treated at work. We need only look to the recent tragedy that occurred on the Huntsville campus of the University of

Alabama to see what can happen when an individual decides to take matters into her own hands and murder colleagues. One cannot help but wonder if some form of bullying was occurring between this professor and her colleagues. Could workplace bullying have pushed the alleged killer over the edge? Could workplace bullying push you or one of your colleagues over the edge? Steps must be taken to prevent future tragedies like this from occurring in our workplaces. We must remember that though invisible to others, the wounds caused by workplace bullying are real. If targeted employees cannot turn to others for help in healing their wounds, they may turn to drastic measures to bring attention to their pain. By then it may be too late for the targeted person and for others. Workplace bullying can no longer be ignored. A life should not be lost because of our failure to address bullying in our

workplaces. We all have a responsibility to do what we can to prevent workplace bullying. What will you do today to stop bullying in your workplace? What will you do to save a life?

For more information visit www.bulliednomore.com.

References

Rayner, C. & Hoel, H. (1997). A summary review of literature relating to workplace bullying. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, Vol. 7, p. 181 -191.