

TechCast Article Series

The Increasing Problem of Office Bullying

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Over the past year, workplace bullying has become a popular topic in the media. Although bullying has occurred in the office for a long time, many studies show that it is becoming a more prevalent problem, at a time when technological change has made workplace collaboration more important than ever. Even with more attention to this issue, it has not yet become clear why office bullying is increasing in workplaces around the world.

A bully is defined as "...a person who is unable and unwilling to recognize the effect of their behavior on others, does not want to know of any other way of behaving, and is unwilling to recognize that there could be better ways of behaving."¹ This mindset leads to excluding colleagues socially, yelling, persistent criticism, and purposefully designing tasks for failure.²

Recent studies have shown how serious this problem has become. A study by Wayne Hochwarter at Florida State University showed that 31 percent of respondents had received the "silent treatment" from their bosses in the past year and 27 percent reported that their supervisor had spoken negatively about them to other managers and employees.³

Employees in this kind of abusive relationship experience more exhaustion, tension, and depression, and are less likely to work on additional tasks or work extra hours. The Florida State study found that employees are more likely to quit a job because of unhappiness with their bosses than with their pay.⁴ An interviewee who recently quit because of an abusive boss explained, “My self esteem vanished, and I found it hard to even get myself out of bed. Since starting at my new job, I can sleep better, feel better about my life, and ... I’m back to my old self.”⁵

Even though many studies have explored this issue, most focus on which kinds of employees are more likely to be targets of bullying and the fact that adult bullies were also childhood bullies.⁶ These explanations do not clarify why bullying is becoming a generally increasing issue for workplaces.

One almost comical explanation is that many persons with mental disturbances end up in management positions. A 2004 Canadian study found that sub-criminal psychopaths are more likely to be in a management than any other job. In fact, a survey by Badbossology.com found that not only did almost half of U.S. workers want to fire their bosses, but about one-third thought their boss needed psychological evaluation.⁷

Almost anyone with work experience has worked with or for someone that they believed to be “unstable.” One interviewee noted, “My previous boss was really insane. He would not only scream all day, but he would sit at his desk and hit himself over the head with his mousepad.”⁸

Many employees must also contend with decreased job stability and economic pressures, and bullying has been attributed to people being overly aggressive in safeguarding their livelihood. When an employee feels their job is in jeopardy, they may develop a “zero sum” mentality and think they can only succeed if someone else fails.⁹

Tattling, gossiping, and rude behavior grow more common in these environments, even in the nonprofit world. An interviewee who works for a national nonprofit explained, “When I was hired by [my current employer], it was obvious that one of my coworkers saw me as a threat. Since then, she has refused to train me on certain tasks, spread rumors about my background, and even hides files from me.”¹⁰

Another explanation for the increase in office bullying is the widening age gap between employees. Because many older people are staying in the workplace later, there are currently employees of many different generations struggling to work together. Generation Y workers are starkly different than the Baby Boomers who currently make up much of the management structure.¹¹

Because of the difference in lifestyle, experience, and desires, Baby Boomers often feel frustration with their younger counterparts. Furthermore, because of the general aggravation of aging, many boomers are trying to hold on to the personal power they still have. “My current boss is six months from retirement,” one interviewee remarked. “Even though she’s almost out the door, she is trying to hold on to her power. I really believe that she thinks we won’t be able to function without her.”¹²

Another explanation is that the managers who become bullies often have no management training. Peggy Klaus, a communications and leadership coach, feels financial services, sales, law and medical fields are more likely to have bullying bosses. "I'd say 95 percent of people I've worked with in the medical and legal professions do not have professional leadership and management training. If you were good at these professions, it was deemed that you would run the law firm without managerial skills. "You can't really blame the person," explains Klaus.¹³ Indeed, as the baby boomer generation begins to retire, there will be a greater need for managers. If they lack training, it can be reasonably expected that this issue will continue and compound.

Some research suggests that women are more problematic than men. According to the Workplace Bullying Institute, 58 percent of bullies are women. However, all bullies are more likely to target women, who make up 80 percent of all targets. Reasons for this demographic distinction have been attributed to many factors, including the theory that women bosses are harder on their same-sex employees and that women tend to accept it.¹⁴

Overall, the problem of workplace bullying not only inflicts a high emotional and physical toll, but it also causes financial and management problems. Employers need to enact rules that specify what is considered "bullying." All employees should be made aware of these policies and know how to report problems. Companies should not tolerate this behavior.

Additionally, it is clear that managers need to have more training on how to appropriately manage staff. This training should also include the negative

impacts of behavior such as bullying and the positive results of maintaining good relationships with staff. Managers should be taught to understand employees of all ages so that they can not only be more tolerant, but also so they can help all employees relate and work together.

It's interesting to think today's move from hierarchical organizations towards self-managed teams may diminish workplace bullying. If employees are able to choose whom they prefer to work with, it can be reasonably expected that workplace bullying will not be tolerated.

¹ Hannabuss, Stuart. *Bullying at work*. Library Management, Volume 19 Number 5; 1998: 304-310.

² Mayer, Tiffany. *Workplace bullies: Bullying in the office or factory can cause potentially devastating problems for employees and employers*. The Standard, January 24, 2006: B1.

³ *Battling against a bad boss*. Management-Issues. www.management-issues.com; December 5, 2006.

⁴ *Battling against a bad boss*. Management-Issues. www.management-issues.com; December 5, 2006.

⁵ Interview with L.C., Age 25, Washington, DC, 11/2006.

⁶ Einarsen, Stale. *The nature and causes of bullying at work*. International Journal of Manpower, Volume 20 Number 12; 1999: 16-27.

⁷ *Battling against a bad boss*. Management-Issues. www.management-issues.com; December 5, 2006.

⁸ Interview with R.S., Age 25, Washington, DC, 11/2006.

⁹ *Violence at work has reached epidemic levels..* Management-Issues. www.management-issues.com; June 15, 2006.

¹⁰ Interview with S.A., Age 30, Washington, DC, 11/2006.

¹¹ Jayson, Sharon. *Companies slow to adjust to work-life balance concerns of Gen-Y*. USA Today, 12/6/2006.

¹² Interview with R.R., Age 24; Washington, DC: 11/2006.

¹³ Vierria, Dan. *Bully Boss: Work with a 'Devil' Befriending Co-Workers, 'Zen-Like' State' can Help You Cope*. The Seattle Post-Intelligencer, July 10, 2006: C1.

¹⁴ Morsch, Laura. *Standing Up to the Office Bully: Four tips.* CNN.com, October 6, 2006.