
Bullying in the Workplace

What is workplace bullying?

Bullying is usually seen as acts or verbal comments that could mentally hurt or isolate a person in the workplace. Sometimes, bullying can involve negative physical contact as well. Bullying usually involves repeated incidents or a pattern of behaviour that is intended to intimidate, offend, degrade, or humiliate a particular person or group of people. It has also been described as the assertion of power through aggression.

Is bullying a workplace issue?

Currently there is little occupational health and safety legislation in Canada that specifically deals with bullying in the workplace. Quebec legislation includes “psychological harassment” in the “Act Respecting Labour Standards.” Some jurisdictions have legislation on workplace violence in which bullying is included. In addition, employers have a general duty to protect employees from risks at work. This duty can mean both physical harm and mental health. Many employers choose to address the issue of bullying as both physical and mental harm can “cost” an organization.

In general, there will be differences in opinion and sometimes conflicts at work. However, behaviour that is unreasonable and offends or harms any person should not be tolerated.

What are examples of bullying?

While bullying is a form of aggression, the actions can be both obvious and subtle. It is important to note that the following is not a checklist, nor does it mention all forms of bullying. This list is included as a way of showing some of the ways bullying may happen in a workplace. Also remember that bullying is usually considered to be a pattern of behaviour where one or more incidents will help show that bullying is taking place.

Examples include the following:

- spreading malicious rumours, gossip, or innuendo that is not true
- excluding or isolating someone socially
- intimidating a person
- undermining or deliberately impeding a person’s work
- physically abusing or threatening abuse
- removing areas of responsibilities without cause
- constantly changing work guidelines
- establishing impossible deadlines that will set up the individual to fail
- withholding necessary information or purposefully giving the wrong information
- making jokes that are “obviously offensive” by spoken word or email
- intruding on a person’s privacy by pestering, spying, or stalking
- assigning unreasonable duties or workload that are unfavourable to one person (in a way that creates unnecessary pressure)
- underwork—creating a feeling of uselessness
- yelling or using profanity
- criticizing a person persistently or constantly
- belittling a person’s opinions
- unwarranted (or undeserved) punishment
- blocking applications for training, leave, or promotion
- tampering with a person’s personal belongings or work equipment

Bullying in the Workplace (2)

It is sometimes hard to know if bullying is happening at the workplace. Many studies acknowledge that there is a fine line between strong management and bullying. Comments that are objective and are intended to provide constructive feedback are not usually considered bullying, but rather are intended to assist the employee with their work.

If you are not sure an action or statement could be considered bullying, you can use the "reasonable person" test. Would most people consider the action unacceptable?

How can bullying affect an individual?

People who are the targets of bullying may experience a range of effects. These reactions include the following:

- shock
- anger
- feelings of frustration and/or helplessness
- increased sense of vulnerability
- loss of confidence
- physical symptoms such as
 - inability to sleep
 - loss of appetite
- psychosomatic symptoms such as
 - stomach pains
 - headaches
- panic or anxiety, especially about going to work
- family tension and stress
- inability to concentrate
- low morale and productivity

How can bullying affect the workplace?

Bullying affects the overall "health" of an organization. An "unhealthy" workplace can have many effects. In general these include:

- increased absenteeism
- increased turnover
- increased stress
- increased costs for employee assistance programs (EAPs), recruitment, etc.
- increased risk for accidents / incidents
- decreased productivity and motivation
- decreased morale
- reduced corporate image and customer confidence
- poorer customer service

Bullying in the Workplace (3)

What can you do if you think you are being bullied?

If you feel that you are being bullied, discriminated against, victimized, or subjected to any form of harassment,

Do

- **Firmly** tell the person that his or her behaviour is not acceptable and ask him or her to stop. You can ask a supervisor or union member to be with you when you approach the person.
- **Keep** a factual journal or diary of daily events. Record the following:
 - the date, time and what happened in as much detail as possible
 - the names of witnesses
 - the outcome of the event

Remember, it is not just the character of the incidents, but the number, frequency, and especially the pattern that can reveal the bullying or harassment.

- **Keep** copies of any letters, memos, emails, faxes, et cetera, received from the person.
- **Report** the harassment to the person identified in your workplace policy, your supervisor, or a delegated manager. If your concerns are minimized, proceed to the next level of management.

Do not

- **Do not retaliate.** You may end up looking like the perpetrator and will most certainly cause confusion for those responsible for evaluating and responding to the situation.

What can an employer do?

The most important component of any workplace prevention program is management commitment. Management commitment is best communicated in a written policy. Since bullying is a form of violence in the workplace, employers may wish to write a comprehensive policy that covers a range of incidents (from bullying and harassment to physical violence).

A workplace violence prevention program must

- be developed by management and employee representatives
- apply to management, employees, clients, independent contractors, and anyone who has a relationship with your company
- define what you mean by workplace bullying (or harassment or violence) in precise, concrete language
- provide clear examples of unacceptable behaviour and working conditions
- state in clear terms your organization's view toward workplace bullying and its commitment to the prevention of workplace bullying
- precisely state the consequences of making threats or committing acts of violence
- outline the process by which preventive measures will be developed
- encourage reporting of all incidents of bullying or other forms of workplace violence
- outline the confidential process by which employees can report incidents and to whom
- assure no reprisals will be made against reporting employees
- outline the procedures for investigating and resolving complaints
- describe how information about potential risks of bullying/violence will be communicated to employees

Bullying in the Workplace (4)

- make a commitment to provide support services to victims
- offer a confidential Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to allow employees with personal problems to seek help
- make a commitment to fulfill the prevention training needs of different levels of personnel within the organization
- make a commitment to monitor and regularly review the policy
- state applicable regulatory requirements, where possible

What are some general tips for the workplace?

Do

- **Encourage** everyone at the workplace to act towards others in a respectful and professional manner.
- **Have** a workplace policy in place that includes a reporting system.
- **Educate** everyone that bullying is a serious matter.
- **Try to work out** solutions before the situation gets serious or "out of control."
- **Educate** everyone about what is considered bullying and whom they can go to for help.
- **Treat** all complaints seriously, and deal with complaints promptly and confidentially.
- **Train** supervisors and managers in how to deal with complaints and potential situations. Encourage them to address situations promptly whether or not a formal complaint has been filed.
- **Have** an impartial third party help with the resolution, if necessary.

Do not

- **Do not ignore** any potential problems.
- **Do not delay** resolution. Act as soon as possible.