



BULLYING AT WORK

WHAT'S AN EMPLOYER TO DO?

BY DIANE CITRINO

“My boss is a bully!” As a workplace investigator, I am often asked to come in when there appears to be a pattern of conduct that, to put it mildly, rubs people the wrong way. The supervisor who is accused of such conduct typically says he or she is just giving “direct feedback” or “holding a poor performer accountable.” An employer who does nothing when faced with these counter-narratives is at risk of a myriad of problems.

Studies document that abrasive behavior at work reduces productivity and quality of work, increases turnover, and causes suffering. In a study involving 775 businesses that surveyed people who had unpleasant interactions at work, the costs of abrasive conduct included findings that 78% said their commitment to the organization declined; 66% said their own performance declined; 63% lost work time avoiding the offender; 48% intentionally decreased their work effort; 47% intentionally decreased time at work; 38% intentionally decreased the quality of their work; and 12% left their job because of the experience.¹

Abrasive workplace behaviors can generally be grouped into three buckets: intimidating behavior, excessively controlling behavior, and public humiliation. Examples of intimidating behavior include such things as screaming, throwing things, physically hitting or touching, swearing, and name-calling. Over-control can manifest itself in a number of ways such as “my way or the highway” mandates, micro-

managing every email, giving instructions that must be followed without deviation, or unreasonably limiting a subordinate’s time away from their workstation, even to use the bathroom. Public humiliation may involve sarcasm, sabotage, hostile remarks, or correcting an employee’s work publicly rather than in a private setting. In some workplaces, one person may be exhibiting all three types of abrasive behaviors. The abrasive behaviors range on a continuum from mild to severe.

Employees who are managed by someone displaying these behaviors may not speak up for fear of losing their job. In some workplaces, because the behavior of the supervisor has not been dealt with for some

time, it is considered an “open secret” and complaining is perceived as futile. Sometimes employers have heard

complaints but excuse the behavior of a long-time employee with phrases such as, “That’s just Joe being Joe” or admonish subordinates not to take it personally. This allows the behavior to continue — and it may get worse.

An important tool in encouraging employees to report abrasive behavior is having a good complaint procedure. The EEOC offers several guidelines for creating an effective reporting procedure: (1) Employees should be encouraged to report harassment to management before it becomes severe or pervasive; (2) More than one individual should be designated to take complaints and each such individual should be easily accessible; (3) Employees should be assured that their complaints will be kept as confidential as possible; (4) At least one person outside the employee’s chain of command should be designated to receive complaints.

A procedure that instructs employees to report harassment to their immediate supervisors is not adequate since the supervisor may be the harasser or may not be able to remain impartial. Employers may also consider using an

anonymous reporting app such as STOPit² which offers a secure method for employees to report harassment.

Once a report of abrasive behavior has been made, the employer must immediately assess the situation and begin gathering additional information. The alleged bully often is good at his or her job and getting good results for the company: that’s why they were promoted to supervisor. It can be difficult for a company to



know if someone who is complaining is alleging bullying because finally the subordinate employee is being held accountable for errors, or because there is a real problem with the supervisor's behavior. But unlike sexual harassment, which typically occurs in private settings, bullying is often on public display in the workplace with multiple witnesses to the extreme behavior; many employees may have seen the emptying of desk drawers onto the floor, the throwing of paper clips during a meeting, or an expletive-laced tirade.

The employer needs to act. The first step to managing conduct is to first determine exactly what is happening. This is where an investigation, particularly one that is from outside the company, can be helpful. The investigation will uncover what behaviors are present in the workplace and how subordinates are experiencing the behavior. Next, employers must determine whether the facts uncovered in the investigation show acceptable or unacceptable conduct. If people are not being treated with respect, the employer must intervene.

Conduct, like performance, can be managed. Just as an employer manages performance by setting expectations, evaluating and documenting what is done, and recognizing and rewarding good performance while setting consequences for poor performance, the same can be done for conduct. If conduct is not acceptable, management must do something. People with abrasive behaviors can be coached to improve how they interact with others. Bullies can learn to channel their work anxiety that they take out on others in a way that does not have disastrous consequences for their colleagues and subordinates.³ Effective employer intervention can improve morale and the bottom line by ending the suffering caused by abrasive behavior.

1 Pearson, C. M., & Porath, C. L. (2009). *The cost of bad behavior: How incivility ruins your business—And what you can do about it*. New York: Portfolio/Penguin Group (USA).

2 <https://stopitsolutions.com/stopit-app/>

3 Laura Crawshaw, *Taming the Abrasive Manager: How to End Unnecessary Roughness in the Workplace (The Jossey-Bass Management Series)*, (2000).



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