

Workplace Bullying: Shape Up or Ship Out

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Abstract—In these times of global unemployment crises, a job is not just a means of survival but a way of living with dignity and honour. However, things turnaround for significant percentage of working population all over the globe and they don't find in work what they originally joined it for. The workplace gets hostile to them, people behave aggressively, they feel harassment They get bullied. In this study we try to show how big a menace the workplace bullying is. We focus on its devastating effects on the lives of people and the organizational culture. By taking suitable examples from various researches, books, magazines, essays, government reports, NGOs and other highly accepted online sources, we try to show how lethal it could be for an organization if it gives in to the disease of workplace bullying. The study suggests some measures about how management can exercise control and ensure the work environment becomes appealing and result in the better productivity and profitability. Our study is driven by the belief that bullying of every kind needs to be stopped at every level and employees be given the relaxed and dignified workplace to work at. This reading should serve as a motivational tool for the organizations where bullying of any sort is prevalent, to check, control and make sure the employees are taking pride in being part of their work culture. Further, the reader shall gain the significant understanding of people involved in this act and effects it may have on the lives of victims and organizational efficiency.

Keywords: Bullying; harassment; organizational culture & work environment.

1. INTRODUCTION

Bullying is a grave issue that people may think is only associated with cyber world or the schoolyards, given to the fact that the term was publicized originally in relation to cyber crimes and pulling-a-leg behavior of students in schools. However, it exists in the world other than that of the schools and has devastating effect on the lives of people. Bullying is persistent, hostile, aggressive behavior that can be verbal or non-verbal. It makes people feel crazy, anxious and scared that ultimately leads to depression, sleeping disorders or physical ailments. What makes it important is that it doesn't just remain confined to one's workplace, rather it bleeds into the families. When a person is abused at work, the stress is carried home which often shows in his aggression towards the family and the concerned person for instance screams at his family members. So we say it creeps into the personal lives of people as well.

The U.S. Workplace Bullying Survey conducted by Workplace Bullying Institute (WBI) in February 2014 says that bullying is repeated mistreatment, abusive conduct that is threatening, humiliating or intimidating and is so prevalent in the U.S. that one in every ten workers say they are being bullied at work. It is an intensified subject in a way that it is not confined to the lower level workers only, rather mobbing is at times faced by managers and supervisors as well. A victim is systematically mistreated by fellow workers, seniors and subordinates on the basis of reasons that are manifold,

resulting in high turnover, low morale and absenteeism and loss of key personal from the organization. The mobbing or bullying victims are targeted because of color, race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, accent, body stature and many other reasons.

The bully (person involved in mobbing others) gives in to the heinous act for the fact that he may be deriving pleasure and fun out of doing this and may not have the intention of hurting anyone. However, most of the times it is driven by pure intentions and a bully plans and executes the process systematically. The mobbing may seem to be harmless and for that matter some take it positively in the way of having fun at the workplace and may often promote it as a tool to keep the employees motivated and happy, but effects on those targeted may be so devastating that the victims have been reported to have committed suicide.

The corporate sexual abuse that's being studied separately and independently by researchers and academicians over globe, given to the intensity of the sexual abuse incidents, is actually one of the ways people get bullied at work. It has been reported both men and women are victims of the sexual abuse, although the abuse of men has not been given due consideration, the reason possibly being the comparatively lesser number of incidents reported than that of women.

The bullying or mobbing needs to be dealt with preferentially since it could be devastating for the employees besides other work related stress. The targeted

employees have been reported to be suffering from physical and psychological distress. There are three patterns of negative effects visible in the victims as identified by Brodsky (1976).

- Development of Vague physical symptoms such as weakness, pain and aches, loss of strength etc.
- Psychological depression visible in the behaviour like victim trying to avoid social groups, becoming conservative and introvert.
- Other psycho-physical symptoms in the form of hypersensitivity, nervousness and hostility.

The act of bullying needs to be eradicated out from every level of the organization because it leaves the employee in a helpless and defenseless position where from the victim finds no option but to quit or switch the job. Now if the victim holds some key position in the organization, his attrition may not be favorable to the operations, and for that matter, not to the business in general. Mobbing in its initial stages happens every now and then only. But it gets intensified with time and the victim may face it frequently as the bully gets a chance. It gets worse if it remains unnoticed and people may have to deal with this disgrace on daily basis.

Our purpose is to influence the mind of the reader and make him believe that we need to “Shape Up” and create a kind of culture in the organization that is dignifying to one and all. We want the reader to understand that mobbing doesn’t bring fun to the workplace and needs to be stopped in its initial stages, else it spoils the work culture and we “Ship Out” on the competitive lines.

2. OBJECTIVE

Knowing that bullying can lead to stress, degradation of the mental health of people that ultimately results in the lower performance and in some extreme cases, to the attrition of the best performer, we aim to instil a thinking in the administration about the seriousness of subject and take immediate steps to control the workplace bullying. The objective of the study is to bring the hazards of the workplace bullying to the forefront and suggest some measures about how this undesirable practice can be taken care of.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Christine Comaford[2] in her article “How to Stop Workplace Bullies In Their Tracks” published in Forbes (Mar, 2014) gives some good examples to make us understand what bullying may look like. She says, The VP of Finance constantly interrupts and actively prevents others from speaking in meetings. He scoffs when they share ideas/make suggestions.

A Managing Director at a financial services firm publicly trashes another Director’s new strategy, tearing it apart without having the domain expertise to truly understand what she is saying.

The lead software engineer makes snide remarks about the product development process during team meetings. He publicly denounces the marketing team too.

What do these three have in common? They’re bullies.

The term bullying is used in the United Kingdom and some English-speaking countries to identify many actions that Leymann terms as mobbing behaviors. It appears both terms are being used somewhat interchangeably (Tammy L.Shelton, 2011)[7] . Harassment at work has been claimed to be more crippling and devastating problem for employees than all other work-related stressors together (Wilson, 1991)[8] . Mobbing is psychological terror involving “hostile and unethical communication directed in a systematic way by one or few individuals mainly toward one individual (Leymann, 1984). Leymann (1990) divided the actions involved in bullying and psychological terror at work into five different forms which include the manipulation of:

- The victim’s reputation.
- His or her possibilities of performing the work tasks .
- The victim’s possibilities of communicating with co-workers.
- His or her social circumstances .
- Cluster of behaviors included physical coercion or assaults.

Spratlen (1995) defines mobbing as behavior or situations without sexual or racial connotations which the person perceives to be unwelcome, unwanted, unreasonable, inappropriate, excessive, or a violation of human rights. Brodsky (1976) uses the term harassment as a behavior that “involves repeated and persistent attempts by one person to torment, wear down, frustrate, or get a reaction from another. It is behavior that persistently provokes pressures, frightens, intimidates, or otherwise discomforts another person.” Brodsky (1976) pointed out how crippling and pervasive the effects of harassment on mental health, physical health, and worker productivity were and expressed the belief that these claims were “only the tip of an iceberg in relation to the actual incidents. The cost of mobbing is evident in legal fees, settlements, turnovers, health of employees, morale’s, and counseling fees Keim & McDermott (2010). According to the Workplace Bullying Institute (2007), 37 percent of the U.S. work force experienced bullying in 2007. Also, nearly 18 percent of the bullies were coworkers and 24 percent of the victims of bullying had their jobs terminated as a result of workplace bullying. Lastly, 40 percent of the individuals targeted by bullies quit their jobs, accounting for a loss of 21 million U.S. workers to employers who currently face shortages of skilled workers (Workplace Bullying Institute, 2007). As discussed in the previous sections of this reading, bullying is not just confined to a particular level in the organization, rather it can be found anywhere throughout the structure. Brodsky (1976) describes name-calling, physical contact, or overt accusations as common at lower

levels, whereas attacks on professional abilities, job transfers, and dismissals are common at middle and upper levels.

Different nations place different stress on the incidents of human rights violation depending upon how the incidents have been reported to them and how do they think these incidents affect the lives of people. Although sexual harassment violates federal statutes in the United States, mobbing and bullying do not. In contrast to statutes in Europe and Canada, U.S. employment law provides little protection for workers from mobbing and bullying (Yamada, 2000). In 1998, the ILO published the report, Violence at Work, written by Di Martino. In this report, mobbing and bullying behaviors are discussed alongside homicide and other more commonly known violent behaviors. Besides the negative consequences attached to the mobbing, it is so much common in the corporate that most of the victims, although disturbed, take it for granted now. Hornstein, (1996) in his book Burtal Bosses and Their Prey, estimated that as many as 20 million Americans face workplace abuse on a daily base – a near epidemic.

4. BULLYING: WHO IS THE VICTIM?

The workplace bullying is not like the schoolyard bullying where the victim is shy and quiet, with few friends and little social support, nor is victim a weakling. The victim is targeted most likely because he/she is some kind of threat to the bully. The degree and kind of threat a bully perceives rests in his mind and the mobbing adopted is purely systematic and intentional aimed at disturbing the target. According to the research conducted by the Workplace Bullying Institute in the year 2000, the targets appear to be the most skilled persons in the work group. In the intentional act of mobbing, the bully tries to control the target who is rather independent and doesn't want to be enslaved. So when the target takes steps to keep their independence relevant, the bully tends to escalate his campaign on hatred towards the target and may use any basis to shake his confidence. The bullies normally mob at target's color, race, ethnicity, gender, body stature, accent or any other basis that is thought of as inferior by most of the people and that victim may feel bad about.

Targets as mentioned before are skilled and are the ones whom the semi-skilled or the new employees turn to for help, which is something that their bosses and co-workers can't stand and this invites mobbing in a way that the bully bosses and co-workers try to take the credit of what the skilled target did.

Speaking of the Intentional bullying where the bullies use the pre-planned and systematic approach to bring down the target, the victim is usually the guy with more social skills, he is outspoken and hard-headed. Most of his colleagues and the management appreciate his skills with which he dominates the workplace. They are the ones

who have the desire to help and nurture with greater emotional intelligence. So for the bully to take down this target and keep his own image, is going to need a plan and perfectly designed way out. He will go to any level to disgrace the target whose existence is a threat to him.

Bullying is also Unintentional wherein a bully doesn't want to hurt the feelings of the target and doesn't have the intention to disgrace him. Rather the bully gives in to the act of mobbing just to make it a moment of happiness for him and to have a reason why he comes to work every day. However, we can't deny the fact that even this type of mobbing leads to the psychological distress and decreased morale on part of the victim, because the target doesn't know why he is being attacked. The Victim in this type of mobbing is different from the intentional mobbing in a way that he has poor social skills, displays vulnerability (e.g., "look scared"), is nonassertive (e.g., "gives in to the bully too easily"), is withdrawn and solitary (e.g., "talks quietly"). They do nothing actively to provoke their tormentors, rather we say their helplessness does it for them. These victims are the polar opposites of the victims in the previous form of bullying.

5. BULLYING: WHO IS THE BULLY?

You may think as people progress in their life, they will stop the behaving stupid. Unfortunately, we are trying to prove it otherwise, and that by the way, happens to be the truth. Adults can be bullies as well. Although their bullying behavior is primarily confined to verbal abuse, but their goal remains the same as in children and teenage bullying and that's dominance.

Usually the bully is a person in authority who feels some kind of threat to his power by the victim, but the bully may also be a co-worker who is insecure or immature. In a particular company, bullying can be the result of one person who acts as a bully. However as mentioned before in this reading sometimes company culture encourages this kind of behavior and in that case bullying in the result of joint effort of all. A bully can be a self centered guy who doesn't show any empathy to anyone and only cares about himself. He is not worried of the consequences and will just put others down, Bullying Statistics Organisation calls this type of bully as Narcissistic Bully. A bully can also be Impulsive wherein he doesn't plan the things. The behavior of this kind of bully falls in the category of the unintentional bullying as discussed under the heading "Who is the Victim". When a bully doesn't see the things turning up his way, rather he was not able to exercise dominance on the victim using verbal abuse, he may resort to physical confrontation. This is the extreme and highly disturbed bully known by the name Physical Bully. He may relate himself to stealing or destroying the property of the victim. Management can also recognize the bully by his sarcastic and demeaning language. His words are damaging and disturb the victim emotionally

and psychologically. He could be called by the name Verbal Bully. Sometimes a person doesn't want to be a bully, but may assist a bully in his heinous acts or just praise his conduct. He is just a "get-along" type person and does so to get the favor of the bully to actually protect himself from being a victim. He is just a Secondary Bully. A person becomes a bully primarily because he has either been bullied before in the same organization or the different one, else he has himself been a bully before and derived benefits from his act. But there is little a management can do to figure this out and the only way to know a bully is to closely monitor his behaviour with his peers, seniors and subordinates.

6. WHY DO THEY DO IT ?

The reasons for a person to act like a bully are manifold. They may be doing it just for fun or they would really mean to show down the victim. Whatever the reason of their making, bullies have one thing in common and it is that they feel little to no remorse over their actions. In this study we figure out some major reasons that have a role in the creation of the bullies and try to answer the question "Why do they do it" ?

6.1 Emotionally Unintelligent

Bullies are rather emotionally weak and often misinterpret other people's behaviour as being hostile. They become angry and aggressive quickly than other people. The false perception of reality makes it uneasy for them to enter into the healthy relationship with others. They have problem in emotional management, which could be the result of many factors like improper socializing as child, physiological differences.

6.2 Low Self-esteem

Even though some bullies have high self-esteem and give in to the act of bullying just to make them feel good, but the generally held belief is that all bullies have low self-esteem and act out just to compensate. A bully feels the psychological or emotional setback which leads to the generation of negative feelings which they can't live with. So just to defend the image they have of themselves they would fire at others.

6.3 Pseudo-Personality

Authoritarianism, desire to control and dominate are some of the common traits found in bullies. Besides, what they share in common is what we call as "narcissistic personality disorder" which is the feeling of oneself as elite, special and tendency to be exploitative. Further researches suggest that bullies suffer from other personality disorders like insincerity, stubbornness, propensity to manipulate and the like. While there could be many reasons for these personality problems, most of them are attributed to the disturbed childhood, when most of the needs went unfulfilled.

7. BULLYING: HOW CAN WE STOP IT ?

To stop a thing from happening, we first need to identify it and know that it is happening. An executive of course won't be able to resolve the problem unless he first recognizes the problem and be firm that it exists. Most of the researches conducted by various agencies especially the Workplace Bullying Institute (WBI) reveal that bullying of some kind prevails in almost every organization, however, the intensity could be different. It is the intensity that catches the attention and helps the administration to recognize the problem. Mobbing of small intensity generally goes un-noticed and is taken as part of the everyday fun at the workplace. Its is actually this fun that if adhered to, offends people in the long run. "Rather when fun intensifies to the level of offense, call it bullying"

Not calling bullying "bullying," in order to avoid offending the sensibilities of those who made the bullying possible, is a disservice to bullied individuals whose jobs, careers, and health have been threatened as the result. Tom Engelhardt said it wisely when he said, "Words denied mean analyses not offered, things not grasped, surprise not registered, strangeness not taken in, all of which means that terrible mistakes are repeated, wounding ways of acting in the world never seriously reconsidered. The words' absence chains you to the present, to what's accepted and acceptable."

Christine Comaford in her article "How to Stop Workplace Bullies In Their Tracks" (2014) suggests a three step Bully Rehab plan, rather three steps to stop the bullying.

1. Identify how you are enabling it.
2. Once Identified, End the enabling system.
3. Set up a new system with healthy boundaries and behaviors (rich with safety, belonging, mattering and shifting from tension to empowerment).

One of the finest approaches that can be used to stop the mobbing at workplace could be our Five Step Approach.

7.1 Identify

Here you recognize the bully and the victim. This could be the result of the victim reporting it to you or the vigilance of the management.

7.2 Approach

Take a step towards the bully and try to know his mind set by asking few questions like What makes you to do this?. Once you know the reason, you may use the carrot and stick approach to stop this behavior. Sometimes (as discussed before) a bully would put down other just for fun and would stop by just mere threat of being fired. However, if bullying is the result of factors like Low Self-esteem, personality disorders and inferiority complex, mere threat is not going to do it for you. You may need to go further and adopt the following.

7.3 Resolve

So now you know that bully is not doing this out of fun, there is something serious behind the curtain. This step involves knowing the exact reason behind the particular bullying act. Most of the times the bully is not comfortable with the victim, perceiving him as a threat to his image, a rival or just that rude behaviour comes out of general disliking. In such case try to know what exactly about the victim makes him feel uncomfortable, give him options to resolve his inferiority complex. If he is feeling left behind on performance parameters & lashes out at peers or subordinates out of frustration, encourage him to do better, praise him for something good he might have done in the past. Christine Comaford in her article "How to Stop Workplace Bullies In Their Tracks" (2014) calls this as "Giving him what he wants". Put in other words a bully is trying to compensate his feeling of inferiority with his attempt of dominance and control. As an administrator you should help him on his attempt, not by helping him on dominance but by giving him alternate options.

7.4 Monitor/Control

Here you keep the track of whether your strategy of resolving has worked or not. In our example you might have resolved by moving the bully and the victim to different teams or departments where they don't have frequent encounters. Even after resolving, keep in touch with the victim and the bully to be sure about your success. In the words of Christine, "launch the plan and commit to ending the conflict once and for all. Be sure to track it frequently and make sure all concerned see the behavior change too".

7.5 Evaluate

The final answer to your attempt of stopping bullying becomes evident here. If the behavior of bully has changed, you have the game. And if he starts his game again, this time may be with the next victim, the problem is persistent and needs different approach, which could be firing him as well.

8. CONCLUSION

The workplace bullying or mobbing (as we have used the terms interchangeably) is one of the core factors, which if stopped would become one of the major reasons for your employee retention and satisfaction.

"The management must know that besides the failure of achieving targets, there is something else which demotivates and demoralizes your employees".

The studies of workplace bullying have shown that a key performer becomes a liability on the management just because he feels embarrassed at work, he is abused, disguised or put simply he is bullied.

The management must keep a check on its employees and have timely interactions with them just to know how they

feel about the work culture, what could be done to make the environment better. This serves as a way to know if there is any employee feeling bad and the reasons of him feeling so. The bullying doesn't just have to do with the profitability and operations of the business, it has to do with the career and life of the employee as well. As mentioned elsewhere in this reading, the extreme bullying results in the mental depression and even suicide attempts by the victims. Which shows how grave this menace is and the efforts needed on part of management to stop it.

9. REFERENCES

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