

Insights, News & Events

## FROM THE SCHOOLYARD TO THE TEACHERS' LOUNGE: CRACKING DOWN ON ADULT BULLYING

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Recent headlines confirm that the schoolyard bullies of yesteryear are all grown up and have joined the workforce – many of them in schools. Rather than taking place in the schoolyard or cafeteria, adult bullying is occurring in the teachers' lounge and at faculty meetings. Reported cases of workplace bullying are increasing nationwide, grabbing the attention of the media and lawmakers. Being prepared to prevent, address and resolve bullying incidents among co-workers can help you avoid the hefty price tag that can result if you ignore bullies and do nothing.

### **Defining Workplace Bullying**

Unlike the definition of unlawful workplace harassment, which has been crystallized through decades of court interpretation, "workplace bullying" has no universal definition – legal or otherwise. Courts and lawmakers who have addressed bullying commonly describe it as repeated and unreasonable (out of context for the situation) actions taken by an individual or group that make an intentional impact on the person targeted resulting in mental or physical damage.

Workplace bullying occurs in many forms. The more obvious forms of bullying include overtly abrasive behavior such as yelling, engaging in verbal degradation, and inappropriately invading one's

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personal space to intimidate. But not all instances of workplace bullying manifest themselves in such a clear manner. Bullying also occurs through isolation or taking credit for the work of others. Supervisors may engage in bullying behavior by manipulating their subordinates' ability to do their work, either by imposing unreasonable deadlines or increasing their workload. Supervisors also may bully subordinates through intimidating performance management, such as repeated accusations of undocumented errors or constant criticism on matters unrelated to job performance.

Though manifested in many different ways, bullying, no matter its form, is a growing problem for employers. A recent survey revealed that 35% of our nation's workforce (53 million people) report being the target of a bully at work, and 94% report having worked with a bully at some point in their lives. Workplace bullying is four times more common than harassment in the workplace. Its pervasiveness makes it an issue that can no longer be ignored.

### **Consequences Of Workplace Bullying**

Workplace bullying not only directly affects employee morale and, in turn, productivity, but also carries with it a significant risk of legal exposure for the school. Employees targeted by workplace bullies are often paralyzed by the intimidation, and their fear trumps their productivity. Bullying also stifles the communication process in the workplace and undermines the collaborative thinking process necessary in the world of education. In extreme situations, workplace bullying can cause mental distress and the necessity for medical leave or resignation of employment. Each of these consequences may have a significant financial impact that affects the school's bottom line.

In addition to its practical consequences, workplace bullying can have very real legal consequences as well. Victims of workplace bullying have increasingly taken legal action against their employers alleging claims of negligent hiring, intentional infliction of emotional

distress, and discrimination (especially when mental stability is called into question). Since 2003, 25 states have introduced workplace anti-bullying bills that would allow workers to sue for harassment without requiring a showing of discrimination. No laws have been enacted yet, but such laws are clearly on the horizon.

### **Steps To Take Now**

Given the patterns we are seeing as a nation, schools should be sensitive to workplace bullying and be proactive in addressing it. Develop a comprehensive workplace bullying and violence policy that: 1) clearly defines workplace bullying and bullying behaviors; 2) provides a reporting procedure for bullying; and 3) contains an explicit no-retaliation clause. Include the policy in your Faculty and Staff Handbook and disseminate it as a stand-alone policy when initially implemented.

Regularly provide training to your faculty and staff regarding the bullying policy and train your supervisors on how to recognize and address employee concerns about bullying. Finally, take all complaints of workplace bullying seriously and get commitment from your leadership to avoid engaging in a bullying management style. Bullying that occurs amongst faculty and staff must be addressed as carefully as bullying of students.

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