



25 Million Reasons To Stop Workplace Bullying

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When a jury takes time to examine a workplace culture and then reaches a \$25 million verdict against the employer, it's clear that it was doing something wrong. That is exactly what happened after a three-week trial over race harassment and bullying at an upstate New York steel plant. Hopefully the lessons learned by this employer will be ones that can be taken to heart and applied in other workplaces.

Between 2005 and 2008, Elijah Turley worked as a processor operator at the Lackawanna steel plant run by ArcelorMittal Steel. It was tough, strenuous work in a blue-collar environment. But it was even more difficult for Turley because of the treatment he received at the hands of his co-workers. He was made the brunt of abuse and bullying mostly centered on his African-American race.

Turley repeatedly reported the behavior to his bosses, but he claims they waited far too long to react. And even after they hired an investigator to look into the allegations and then suspended several offending co-workers, the harassment persisted.

At trial, the company's main defenses were that it felt "caught in the middle" between the complaints and the co-workers, and that much of what Turley complained about amounted to nothing more than "trash talk" that is common in blue-collar manufacturing facilities.

The jury obviously disagreed. After hearing all of the evidence and deliberating, the jurors unanimously ruled in Turley's favor and awarded him \$25 million in damages. It's one of the largest jury awards in a single-plaintiff employment case in American history.

So where, besides the obvious, did this employer go wrong? A lot can be gleaned from its defenses: It is never a good idea to rely on the "but that sort of behavior is common in our industry" defense.

In the end, perhaps the biggest lesson to be learned from this case is the vital importance of training managers to identify and address workplace bullying and harassment immediately, on sight. Even if managers are told to pass issues to the human resources department, at least then they will be handled and the offending behavior should cease.

The steel mill would not have lost the case if its officials had investigated the treatment of Turley immediately upon learning about it, meted out discipline to the offending employees, reaffirmed its comprehensive employment policies with all employees, and put all managers and employees through annual training sessions to teach them about proper workplace behavior.

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