

# Bullying in the workplace

How employers can deal with a lack of civility in the workplace

**B**ullying has long been considered a concern mainly of parents, teachers and principals, not office managers or CEOs. But in recent years, employers have faced the problem of diminishing civility in the workplace, and that often manifests itself in bullying and other similar kinds of behavior.

“Workplace bullying is basically symptomatic of underlying issues in the culture — uncivil ways of being, behaving and managing people,” says Debra Messer, account manager for *LifeSolutions*, a UPMC *WorkPartners* affiliate. “The bullying may not always be intentional, but it is always harmful and must be addressed.”

*Smart Business* spoke with Messer about bullying and civility in the workplace, how it impacts employers and employees, and what you can do about it.

## What is workplace bullying?

Whether it’s referred to as disrespect, rudeness, bad manners or a lack of interpersonal skills, bullying always comes down to unacceptable behavior in the workplace. This behavior causes distress for the targeted employee, for the co-workers who witness it and for any clients who may be affected by it. It impacts the overall morale of an organization.

Bullying is more than an occasional rude remark or thoughtless gesture. It is repetitive over time, and tends to escalate or worsen if left unchecked. It involves a power disparity. It is a pattern of behavior that serves to put down, embarrass or disempower another person.

## How is a company affected by bullying in the workplace?

An organization in which bullying occurs stands to lose, any way you look at it. Some of the effects of bullying include retention problems and absenteeism, decreased engagement, and a climate of fear and mistrust. Fearful employees hide mistakes to the detriment of customer needs. New ideas are not shared and creativity and innovation can be affected. Also, a company’s public reputation and image can be damaged. Everyone loses when bullying is allowed to continue.

## How common is workplace bullying?

The Workplace Bullying Institute and Zogby International have conducted multiple



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surveys of adult American workers and made several key findings, including that 37 percent of American workers reported being the target of bullying, and 12 percent of employees reported witnessing bullying. That means that nearly half of all workers have had direct or indirect exposure to it.

The survey also found that 72 percent of the bullies were identified as bosses and that more men are perpetrators than women. However, the majority — 57 percent — of bullying targets are women. The study showed that 40 percent of bullied employees do not tell their employer about the bullying and that 62 percent of employers either ignore reported bullying or take action that makes the situation worse.

## Why is bullying coming to light as an issue now?

Bullying has always been present whenever people have worked together. It is only in recent years that it has been identified as a critical issue or a sentinel event and formalized efforts been made to study and address it.

In 2008, the Indiana Supreme Court ruled that workplace bullying is a form of intentional infliction of emotional distress. The court awarded \$325,000 to a plaintiff bullied by a supervisor. This high-profile case helped to propel workplace bullying into the spotlight.

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In response, many companies have begun instating anti-bullying policies, and a number of state legislatures have been considering ‘healthy workplace’ legislation that would offer employees means to address these issues.

## What is the impact of bullying on the person targeted?

The impact can be considered ‘health harming’ to the employee. It can be emotional, psychological, physical, or social injury, and it may result in a loss of production. Moreover, employees who witness other employees being bullied can exhibit reactions and symptoms similar to those of the targeted employee.

## How can workplace bullying problems be solved?

An organization’s leaders need to recognize the more subtle signs of bullying, including those entrenched in the system. Leaders must know how to convey expectations for civil behavior to their employees and commit to consistently and fairly responding to incidents of disrespect or bullying when they occur.

Creating a culture of civility in which disrespect and bullying rarely occur often requires major shifts in thinking, perspective, management styles and behaviors. It will take time, commitment and the willingness to honestly assess the environment and long-held patterns of behavior. It is not for the faint of heart, and one cannot wait until the ‘other side starts to behave better.’ As Gandhi said, ‘You have to be the change you want to see.’

## What are some options for management to deal with this problem?

Workplace bullying does not occur in a culture that does not allow it. Leaders need to ask themselves, ‘Do I send the message that each employee is valued, respected and appreciated, or do employees feel dismissed, expendable, or unheard? Do employees feel they can come to me when they are overloaded or stressed?’

The reality is that a company cannot promote a culture of civility or respect unless leadership exemplifies those qualities. <<