

DEEP DIVE

9 things HR needs to know to curb bullying at work

"You don't pay attention to it until it touches your life," one expert told HR Dive, "but we can't wait until everyone has been personally bullied in order to make it stop."

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When people think of bullying, they may envision the stereotypical middle school setting, where a mild-mannered teen is shoved into a locker, ostracized or, nowadays, trolled on social media. But bullying doesn't stop after middle school; it continues into adulthood and shows up in the workplace on a disturbingly frequent basis.

According to the Workplace Bullying Institute's (WBI) 2017 National Survey, 19% of U.S. employees are bullied, and another 19% witness it. All told, the survey says that 60.3 million Americans are affected by this behavior in the workplace.

WBI's definition of workplace bullying is "repeated, health-harming mistreatment of one or more persons by one or more perpetrators." It includes threats, humiliation, intimidation, work sabotage and verbal abuse, WBI Director Gary Namie told HR Dive.

Not illegal — just expensive

Bullying and harassment share similar traits of severe or pervasive and unwelcome conduct that creates a hostile work environment. Although harassment is against the law, bullying is not, Heather

Becker, partner at Laner Muchin, told HR Dive in an email. "The difference would be that bullying can happen to anyone for any reason. Technically, unlawful harassment is conduct that occurs because of an individual's protected characteristic, such as gender, race, national origin," she said. Bills that would prohibit workplace bullying have been introduced in at least 30 states but none have been made law.

But even if bullying is not unlawful, it comes with a cost. Individuals who are the targets of repeated abusive behaviors can begin to have physical and psychological issues related to high anxiety, depression and stress, Kim Shambrook, vice president, Safety Education, Training and Services for the National Safety Council, told HR Dive.

"As we as a country and society look at total wellness, it's definitely becoming a big issue. People who experience stress at work have other symptoms. They can't sleep; don't want to go to work. There are all sorts of residual effects," she said.

Those effects can impact the employer, she explained. Whether an employee is directly affected or even affected as a witness, the damage can decrease workplace safety and employee morale and increase absenteeism and turnover, Shambrook said.

What HR needs to know

1. Bullying is complicated – even for the aggressor

There's a continuum of abrasive behavior, Linda Beitz, owner of Solutions Through Dialogue, told HR Dive. At one end of the spectrum are people who are slightly annoying but don't cause stress to others. At the far end of the continuum are the rare people with aberrant behavior. Most issues are found in people in the middle of the spectrum, who cause organizational stress to co-

workers, sufficient to interrupt organizational functioning, she said.

"They're people who have a desire to achieve results and think that they are motivating people, utilizing abrasive behaviors," Beitz said. She suggested using people-first language of a "human being with abrasive behaviors" instead of the word "bully," which perpetuates labeling and name-calling. But that doesn't mean the behaviors should be tolerated, she added.

2. A bullying situation says more about the organization than it does the individuals

Certain company cultures are ripe for bullying, Namie said. "It's the establishment of a competitive environment, but not healthy competition, where you could end up with a win-win. We set up a zero-sum competitive world. [For example,] 'I must obliterate you in order for me to enjoy success,'" he explained. In this winner-takes-all scenario, the majority who don't win are demoralized while the single individual is artificially pumped up, he said.

3. A lack of consequences reinforces bullying

When the bully also is a valued employee, there is a systematic, historical problem of organizational leaders failing to address behavior, mainly out of fear and conflict avoidance, Namie said. When a person with aggressive behavior is promoted and praised, neither they nor the organization demonstrates concern for the wellbeing of the other employees, he said.

4. HR cannot stop bullying

This change must come from the top. HR can ensure policies and procedures are established and communicated, but consistently implementing the policies, regardless of the employees involved,

requires action from senior leadership, Namie said. HR, for its part, can try to convince senior leaders that the financial cost of bullying — from payouts, absenteeism, presenteeism, health issues, medical expenses, workers' compensation, safety, turnover and productivity — are not worth ignoring abusive behavior.

5. Any reports of bullying — no matter how seemingly minor, must be investigated

Don't turn a blind eye, Shambrook said. "Any report of bullying should be taken seriously." This includes conducting a thorough investigation. "If someone is found to be engaging [in aggressive behavior], there has to be a consequence, and it has to be spelled out in the policy."

6. Everyone needs training to recognize and address bullying

Front-line supervisors, senior leaders and the employee population need to know what to do when they experience or witness bullying. Leaders need to be trained in emotional intelligence, Beitz said; encourage people to speak up to create a healthier organization, Shambrook added, and ensure employees know where to turn to do so.

7. Improvement is possible

Abrasive employees who are motivated to change can develop new skills, Beitz said. If they are open to feedback and the recognition that their behavior isn't useful — and that there are negative consequences for continuing that behavior — they may be willing to learn new methods. "It's a four-step process: First, waking them up to how they are showing up as a leader or manager. Second, helping them to see the impact that their behavior is having on others. Third, equipping them with an understanding of what

might be driving their behavior, and developing their capacity to accurately read the emotions that others are feeling as a result of their actions. And, fourth, helping them to develop new strategies to get the results they are looking for without causing distress in co-workers and the organization," she said.

8. Targets need support

Unfortunately, most people who are targeted (65%, according to WBI) lose their jobs through no fault of their own, Namie said. They might be fired, reassigned or (somewhat) voluntarily resign. Providing support for the person targeted is critical, Shambrook added. It is vital to encourage the person to use available employee assistance programs, keep them updated on progress, let them know when the issue is resolved and check on them afterward.

9. The "eggshell skull" rule applies

Do not ignore a complaint under the assumption that an employee is overly sensitive. Even if abusive behavior damages one person but not others, the organization is still responsible for that individual who is affected. The eggshell skull rule says that damages aren't any less because one person may be more susceptible to injury.

Workplace bullying can be entrenched in a culture, and it takes a full-scale approach to stop it, but ignoring or minimizing the behaviors or delaying consequences is detrimental to everyone in the organization.

"You don't pay attention to it until it touches your life," Namie said, "but we can't wait until everyone has been personally bullied in order to make it stop."