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Traits and Victims of Workplace Bullies ^[1]

Workplace Answers ^[2] is an e-learning company that provides training to Human Resources professionals and organizations seeking to stay educated about and in compliance with evolving employment law. The following information comes from a Workplace Answers webinar narrated by Lynn Lieber, Esq.

Since most bullying cases are against women, female pronouns will be used in this description.

Traits of Bullies

The bully shows hostile and offensive behavior often unrelated to the job. He can sabotage and undermine the target. The bully targets all different kinds of people—anyone could be a target, including coworkers. The bully may have special knowledge in the organization and tenure making it more difficult for the target to complain about being bullied. The bully may retain information and make himself indispensable to the organization. He may exploit his power. The bully may be in a situation where he cannot be terminated or demoted. He may use retaliation as a threat. He may have uncontrollable mood swings, where rules change daily and people associated with him do not know how to react.

He starts spreading rumors about the target. He may verbally abuse the target in public situations, as well as belittle her ideas, embarrass, tease or disregard her. He may not acknowledge that anything negative is going on, a conspiracy of silence. He may criticize the target's personal life and act in a demeaning and harassing manner. There are also cases of serial bullying with more than one bully involved or secondary bullying. The bully himself may have: insecurities and inadequacies, a need to control, feelings of inferiority, low self-esteem, and a slow, subtle, manipulative way of dealing with people. He works to erode the self-esteem of the target by making the person less relevant to the organization. His brain may be "wired" differently where he gets pleasure from bullying others. He may overvalue bad things and undervalue good things.

Some workplaces pit worker against worker in zero-sum (cutthroat) competitive work arrangements.

It is not always the supervisor who is the bully; it can be co-worker to co-worker. Machiavellian types -- who manipulate others to accomplish their own goals -- see the opportunities. In bullying-prone workplaces, employers reward the aggression with promotions and rewards.

Targets of Bullies

The target of bullying fears losing her job if she reports the abuse. A target often lacks power to defend herself. She may say that she refuses to be intimidated, but that is not always effective. The target may be better liked than the bully. Targets are often honest, ethical, moral, and non-confrontational. She may never tell about the situation. She does not believe anything will change if she complains. She feels powerless and fears for her future prospects. She may have the attitude that this is the way things are and try to dismiss the bully's behavior.

What Organizations Need to Do to Protect Employees from Workplace Bullying

There needs to be a written zero bullying policy. Supervisors need to be held responsible for what happens in their areas. Employee training about bullying is essential: what it is, what appropriate workplace behavior is, and what you should do if you suspect that you are a target or that a co-worker is a target. Everyone at all levels needs training to know when the line has been crossed.

The policy must be integrated with other policies such as the Workplace Violence Prevention policy. The anti-bullying policy should include an explanation of why bullying behavior could be illegal. Human Resources must explain to upper management why it is detrimental to the workplace not to have this policy. There is a need for senior management support to end bullying. In order to know when it is appropriate to complain, basic specific descriptions must be available. Employees should be taught de-escalation techniques, sensitivity and remedial training.

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