

BULLYING IN THE WORKPLACE: FACT OR FICTION?



Eyes on the World by the PAOTY 2011:
Anel Martin

While “trend spotting” over the last few months the same topic kept creeping up. The more I tried to ignore it, the more I started seeing articles, quotes and material everywhere! On Twitter, LinkedIn, the web, even during casual conversations at work. So, I decided to dig a little deeper, and I was surprised at what I found.

Statistics indicate that as many as 77.8% of South Africans have experienced some form of bullying in their careers, as opposed to our US counterparts who reportedly have a 41% incident rate.

Considering the fact that statistics recently released indicates our unemployment rates in May 2012, to be 1 in 4 South Africans, it explains why people stay in these hostile situations for such extended periods. After all, a bad job is better than no job at all!

Obviously, bullying is not a uniquely South African problem; it is a global phenomenon! A major factor, according to most research,

is the global economic downturn which has dramatically increased the incidents of bullying worldwide. The International Labour Organisation has indicated that workplace violence, both physical and emotional, is the single biggest threat to the workplace of the new millennium.

WHAT IS BULLYING?®

What I found horrifying while researching this topic is that many websites start off with a the description of bullying that, once read, many uninformed victims become aware of the fact that they are actually in a hostile work situation.

Bullying is defined as **“repeated inappropriate behavior, direct or indirect, whether verbal, physical or otherwise, conducted by one or more persons against another at the place of work or in the course of employment, which would reasonably be regarded as undermining the individual’s rights to dignity at work”** - Source Irish Government Task Force

The main criteria which remains consistent in all sources is that this act is done with the intention to harm, and is prolonged in nature.

WHO ARE THE BULLIES AND WHO ARE THEIR TARGETED VICTIMS?

Anyone can be a workplace bully, but this kind of behavior is usually associated with people in power.

Bullies usually have two faces: the charming, socially



well adapted and kind face that they show the world and the private face of sarcasm and hostility reserved for their target and often their own families too.

Research in the US also suggests that people, who were bullies as children, can continue this behavior into adulthood. In most cases others cannot believe that this person would be involved in this kind of behavior, and this serves to isolate the targeted victim even further.

Now that we know our perpetrator, what does our target look like?

Well, to be honest, the victim looks like you, like me, or like your colleague in the cubicle next door. However single mothers, and people with a natural low self-esteem, have been identified as the most vulnerable group.

COMMON MANIFESTATIONS OF BULLYING IN THE WORKPLACE?

- Circulating gossip and half-truths
- Using positional power to humiliate, undermine and abuse others
- Taking out your moods on others
- Aggressiveness in the form of insulting remarks, swearing, ridicule, teasing, sarcasm and shouting etc.

- Sexual harassment, racial discrimination and physical violence

WHAT IS THE IMPACT ON THE TARGETED VICTIM?

When exposed to workplace trauma the victim may blame themselves and become ashamed. They tend to become isolated, introverted, emotional, depressed and can develop an even lower self-esteem. This may result in ill health, increased absenteeism and sometimes causes a loss of employment and reputation. The co-workers of the victim may also suffer or in some cases even join in the abuse out of fear.

WHAT IS THE COST TO THE COMPANY?

Workplace bullying has a massive impact on companies too. There is a steady erosion of productivity and loss of human capital. Quality employees leave the company and take their skills with them to other organisations. A UK study conducted by Dr. Charlotte Rayner also suggested that 20% of co-workers who witness bullying will also look for other jobs, so the effect of bullying can ripple through the organization and devastate the workforce.

DON'T BE AFRAID, SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE.

During this process I have identified two fantastic South African websites that provide support; they are: www.sadag.org and www.thepeoplebottomline.com. On these sites you will find helpful tips and additional information which may assist you.

I can also recommend a blog called Bullied by the Boss <http://bulliedbythebossblog.blogspot.com/> which is written anonymously under the pen name of Eva James, taking an honest, witty look at what bullies do and is written in a diary format documenting actual incidents. This is a great way to experience someone else's thoughts on this matter, and gives you the realization that it is not ONLY happening to you.

In conclusion, I wanted to add that this topic may seem a bit depressing at first, but on my journey through the available material, the comments of victims and their suggestions on making it through this trauma, I realized that human beings are strong and that there are still people willing to stand up for what is right in the world! Don't ever give up and remember this too shall pass!

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