How to tell if you are a victim of bullying at the workplace

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The recently reported episodes of secondary school bullying, torture and hazing shocked the nation in the past week. In its wake, Kenya ponders what sick institutional cultures must exist in order to promulgate regularised repeated physical violence by and against students in varying high schools.

Many might not realise that the depravity of bullying exists beyond schools and sports fields. Duncan Chappell and Vittorio Di Martino of the International Labor Office highlight deviant behaviour at workplaces as one of the most pertinent emerging issues in organisations across the globe.
Executives and social scientists alike maintain many terms to describe deviant counterproductive behaviour in work settings including delinquency, deviance, retaliation, revenge, violence, emotional abuse, mobbing, bullying, misconduct, and organisational aggression.

Social scientists Eleanna Galanaki and Nancy Papalexandris define workplace bullying as recurring persistent negative acts directed to one or more persons that create a negative work environment. In bullying, the targeted person experiences difficulty in defending and protecting themselves. Therefore, bullying does not refer to conflicts between two parties of equal strength but rather a more influential aggressor in an imbalance of power.

Managers might not understand the severe depths and prevalence of workplace bullying. Workers in some industries report versions of bullying at rates of 70 per cent. Researchers Ståle Einarsen and Anders Skogstad detail that male-dominated industries valuing machismo and masculinity or efficiency at any and all costs increases workplace tensions and provides greater tolerance for aggressive behaviour.

Construction sites, military barracks, investment banking, and professional sports teams all stand out as highly susceptible industries.

However, female-dominated industries do not enjoy immunity from workplace bullying. The UK Department of Education started warning and educating educators about teacher-to-teacher and principal-to-teacher bullying in primary and secondary schools as far back as 2009.

Charlotte Rayner and Helge Hoel delineate workplace bullying in the following five types. First, a threat to an employee’s professional status might include belittling opinions, public professional humiliation, and accusations about the lack of worker effort. Second, threatening a worker’s personal standing via name-calling, insults, intimidation, etc. Third, superiors may isolate an employee by preventing access to opportunities and meetings, physical or social isolation, and withholding pertinent necessary information. Fourth, staff might get overworked through undue pressure, unnecessary disruptions, and impossible deadlines. Fifth, a supervisor might destabilise a subordinate by failing to give credit when due, assigning meaningless tasks, unjustifiably removing responsibilities, repeatedly reminding him or her of previous blunders, and actively setting up the employee to fail.

Eleanna Galanaki and Nancy Papalexandris highlight the impact of bullying in another study. The effects of workplace bullying affect both individual employees as well as organisations. Negative personal short to medium-term effects include feelings of depression, paranoia, anger, anxiety, despair, plummeting self-esteem, irritability at home and at work, higher blood pressure, mood swings, feelings of helplessness, and lower job and life satisfaction.

Long-term negative personal effects include post-traumatic stress disorder and inability to function in future work environments. An organisation also suffers from bullying through decreased quality of work environments, increased staff turnover, and lower productivity.
Helen Cowie, Paul Naylor, Ian Rivers, Peter Smith, and Beatriz Pereira highlight personal issues that can cause one to bully another including aggressive personality tendencies, history of interpersonal conflict, and one’s capacity to morally disengage. However, organisations stand as the key to reducing the frequency and severity of bullying.

Roberta Fida and her large research team detail institutional factors that influence someone’s propensity to produce counterproductive workplace behaviour even when their internal personal factors do not constitute a propensity for bullying. Organisational causes of workplace bullying include unrealistic key performance indicators, excessive workplace constraints, lack of decision latitude in staff and supervisors, and lack of organisational support all lead to negative emotions that cause employees to increase aggression and, as a result, bullying.

Al-Karim Samnani and Parbudyal Singh highlight additional organisational causes of workplace bullying as accepted aggressive team norms, status inconsistency between similar job grade positions, low departmental autonomy, coercive leadership styles, unfair or impossible reward systems, ambiguous or biased organisational policies, and poor organisational cultures. Peter Armstrong’s research shows how bullying often results during budget decision cycles and from budget constraints.

He details how bullies even build up what he terms “fear capital” to control the target’s behaviour even when the bullying manager might not even be present in the office. Anthony Wheeler and team also discuss how employees who fear personal resource loss from reassignment, possible poor performance reviews, plausible job loss, and decreasing budgets all increase bullies’ gain cycle opportunism that can lead to bullying.

The same research also shows that introverted workers, very agreeable individuals, those with low self-esteem, minorities, and women all sadly receive more bullying on average.

Upon reading the above, do you wonder whether your workplace experiences constitute bullying? Ask yourself the following 17 statements and answer on a five (5) point scale whereby 1 equals “never occurs”, 2 means “yes, occasionally”, 3 stands for “yes, at least once a month”, 4 equates to “yes, at least once a week”, and 5 means “yes, every day”.

You are ordered to do work clearly below your level of competence. You are systematically required to carry out tasks which clearly fall outside your job description. Someone withholding information which affects your performance. You are given tasks with unreasonable or impossible targets or deadlines.

Key areas of responsibility are removed or replaced with trivial or meaningless tasks. You are ignored or excluded. You are exposed to an unmanageable workload. You are subjected to false allegations. Rumours and gossip are spread about you. Somebody tries to sabotage your performance. Hints or signals from others that you should quit your job. Threats of making your life difficult (e.g. overtime, unpopular tasks).

You experience intimidating behaviour, such as invasion of personal space, shoving, or overt violence. Somebody causes you economic or material damages. Pressure not to claim something
which by right you are entitled to (e.g. sick leave, holiday entitlement, travel expenses). Persistent criticism of your work and effort. Your work is excessively monitored.

Look through your responses. If you scored above or equal to a 3.0 on more than five questions, you survive in your job as a victim of workplace bullying. If you scored a 4.0 or higher on six or more questions, then you experience serious workplace bullying and need to exit your current employment. If you scored a 5.0 on six or more questions, you suffer from severe workplace bullying and should consider immediate intervention assistance and psychological counselling to overcome the effects.

In summary, organisations must proactively stamp out entity-induced causes for workplace bullying all the while looking out for individual counterproductive behaviour with clear anti-bullying policies and incident reporting mechanisms.

Individual victims of bullying should document instances of each bullying incident, contact your human resources department, and seek professional counselling.

*Discuss workplace bullying with other Business Daily readers through #Bullying on Twitter.*

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