

## Aggression in the Workplace

By Linda Talley 2010

There are two major types of aggressors in the workplace: the abusive/bully boss and the abusive/bully co-worker. Bullies at any level (boss or employee) can cause devastation in the form of post traumatic stress disorder (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2004). Matthiesen (2006) posits that in most countries, 5-10% of leaders (bosses) are prone to become bullies. Because the leader has reached a certain level on the ladder of success, s/he has acquired an authoritarian leadership style and the organization has created a culture of harassment which leads to morale and productivity issues which all impact the bottom line of an organization. Costs associated with bullying are estimated to be around \$910million/year (Giga, Hoel & Lewis, 2008).

Boys use bullying as a way to gain power/control another person, or to be part of a group but not because they are depressed (Roland, 2002). Girls tend to use all these motives for bullying (Schneider, Gruman & Coutts, 2005). Just as the reason for engaging in bullying varies, so does the characteristics of a bully. First a bully believes people act the way they do intentionally or because of their mental makeup; they experience low self-esteem more often than others and therefore use aggressive acts to build up their self-esteem and gain respect; they have an amoral view of life and how to interact successfully with people (Smorti & Ciucci, 2000 as cited in Schneider, Gruman & Coutts, 2005).

Fuller (2010) cites “rankism” as a way to explain bullying. It’s what people in power do to people who aren’t in power and it appears to be human nature. Fuller suggests that rankism or bullying is prevalent everywhere. It can be seen in racism where one ethnic group despises another; it is used by men to subjugate women; it is used by the young to intimidate/condescend to the elderly; it’s a way to discriminate against particular religious groups; to intimidate/harass people of different sexual orientation; to humiliate people with disabilities; to instill fear in communities by gangs.

Bullying is a learned behavior (Espelage, n.d.). Strategies for prevention must involve a five prong approach. First, continuing research is necessary to view this behavior in longitudinal studies with multivariate methodologies (Espelage & Swearer, 2003). Secondly, the climate in workplaces must be reviewed to assess bullying tactics at all levels of the organization. I believe this is best done by an outside consultant who is not tainted by HR directives or the possible “harassment” mentality of the organization (Matthiesen, 2006). Thirdly, bullying prevention programs and training must be implemented and consistently revisited through review and re-training for all levels within an organization. Fourthly, an organization must review and create policy for all exigencies regarding workplace bullying (Stanton & Beran, 2009). Finally, there must be adverse consequences, as outlined in the policies and procedures of the organization, that must be meted out to the perpetrators. In other words, there must be severe consequences to bullying. Not only would these prevention strategies work in the workplace but much research has already been done in the school/classroom (Roland, 2002; Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Matthiesen, 2006) to demonstrate the usefulness of prevention strategies in schools. These strategies would not be beneficial in the home setting because aggressive people, particularly at home, are not good self-regulators ((Schneider, Gruman & Coutts, 2005). Unless there is a violent act in which the police become involved, the home is one’s castle, even for an aggressive adult or child. Both adults and children must be open to reducing aggression in the home and seek remedies.

Workplace violence is another form of aggression in the workplace. The Occupational Safety & Health Administration (2007) note that violence in the workplace is a serious issue with homicide being the most extreme form of fatal occupational injury. In April, 2007, Bill Phillips shot and killed his boss, David Beverly, at NASA before turning the gun on himself (CNN, 2007).

Workplace aggression does not always end in homicide, but takes a more subtle form based on the effect-danger ratio (Schneider, Gruman & Coutts, 2005). Neuman and Baron (1998) posit a difference between workplace violence and workplace aggression and suggest that aggression takes many forms such as verbal hostility, intentional ostracism, attempts to impede another's ability to perform the work, work slowdowns, wasted materials/damaged products, and lack of citizenship towards other members of the organization. These forms of aggression have a low effect-danger ratio (Schneider, Gruman & Coutts, 2005) and therefore lend themselves easily to produce the greatest amount of harm to an individual and organization (effect) with little concern for retaliation, remorse or getting caught (danger).

The cause of workplace aggression appears to be perceived unfairness. Organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) plays a role in aggression. The less OCB, the more perceived unfairness as it pertains to different ethnic, sexual orientation, gender, cultural groups (Glover & Dent, 2005). Any group who feels they have been treated wrongly will want to get even and as stated in social learning theory (Schneider, Gruman & Coutts, 2005), this process means aggression that could lead to violence in the workplace. Another cause of workplace aggression is the reduction in staff that leads to overwork for those who remain employed. With layoffs and the greater use of part time staff, an employee begins to wonder what their options are and through representative heuristics have identified the aggressive or violent route as the only option (Friedrichs, 2002).

The preventive strategies noted above for bullying would also work for workplace aggression since bullying is a form of workplace aggression (Einarsen, 2000). The key prevention strategy is adverse consequences. Although workplace violence has a legal consequence, aggression must also be dealt with

swiftly; it must be known that aggression will be dealt with severely and consistently; it must be deemed justified or deserved (Schneider, Gruman & Coutts, 2005).

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