Workplace Bullying & Disruptive Behavior: 
What Everyone Needs to Know

What is Workplace Bullying and Who is Affected?
Workplace bullying refers to repeated, unreasonable actions of individuals (or a group) directed toward an employee (or a group of employees), which are intended to intimidate, degrade, humiliate, or undermine; or which create a risk to the health or safety of the employee(s).

Workplace bullying often involves an abuse or misuse of power. Bullying behavior creates feelings of defenselessness and injustice in the targeted individual(s) and undermines an individual’s right to dignity at work.

Bullying is different from aggression. Whereas aggression may involve a single act, bullying involves repeated attacks against the target, creating an on-going pattern of behavior. “Tough” or “demanding” bosses are not necessarily bullies as long as they are respectful, fair and their primary motivation is to obtain the best performance by setting high yet reasonable expectations for working safely. Workplace bullying can be instigated by coworkers, supervisors, contract workers or labor representatives.

Some bullying situations involve employees bullying their peers, rather than a supervisor bullying an employee. The term mobbing refers to a group of coworkers targeting another worker. Supervisors should intervene immediately to address and stop mobbing behaviors.

In a prevalence study of U.S. workers, 41.4% of respondents reported experiencing psychological aggression at work in the past year representing 47 million U.S. workers (Schat, Frone & Kelloway, 2006). The research found that 13%, or nearly 15 million workers, reported experiencing psychological aggression on a weekly basis.

Examples of Bullying:
▲ Unwarranted or invalid criticism
▲ Blame without factual justification
▲ Being treated differently than the rest of your work group
▲ Being sworn at
▲ Exclusion or social isolation
▲ Being shouted at or being humiliated
▲ Excessive monitoring or micro-managing
▲ Being given work with unrealistic deadlines

What is Corporate/Institutional Bullying?
Corporate/institutional bullying occurs when bullying is entrenched in an organization and becomes accepted as part of the workplace culture.

Corporate/institutional bullying can manifest itself in different ways:
▲ Placing unreasonable expectations on employees, where failure to meet those expectations means making life unpleasant (or dismissing) anyone who objects.
▲ Dismissing employees suffering from stress as “weak” while completely ignoring or denying potential work-related causes of the stress.
▲ Encouraging employees to fabricate complaints about colleagues with promises of promotion or threats of discipline.

Signs of corporate and institutional bullying include:
▲ Failure to meet organizational goals.
▲ Increased frequencies of grievances, resignations, and requests for transfers.
▲ Increased absence due to sickness.
▲ Increased disciplinary actions.

If you are aware of bullying in the workplace and do not take action, then you are accepting a share of the responsibility for any future abuses. Witnesses of bullying behavior should be encouraged to report any such incidences. Individuals are less likely to engage in antisocial behavior when it is understood that the organization does not tolerate such behavior and that the aggressor is likely to be punished.

Factors that Increase the Risk for Bullying Behavior:
▲ Significant organizational change (i.e., major internal restructuring, technological change).
Worker characteristics (e.g., age, gender, parental status, apprentice or trainee).

Workplace relationships (e.g., inadequate information flow between organizational levels, lack of employee participation in decisions).

Work systems (e.g., lack of policies about behavior, high rate and intensity of work, staff shortages, interpersonal conflict, organizational constraints, role ambiguity, and role conflict.

How Bullying Affects People and Organizations

Targets of bullying experience significant physical and mental health problems:

- Reduced self-esteem
- Musculoskeletal problems
- Work withdrawal and sickness absence
- Sleep and digestive disturbances
- Increased depression/self-blame
- Family tension and stress
- High stress, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Financial problems due to absence

Each of the individual consequences listed above can be very costly for the organization. Costs of bullying generally fall into three categories:

- Replacing staff members that leave as a result of being bullied, cost of training new employees.
- Work effort being displaced as staff cope with bullying incidents (i.e., effort being directed away from work productivity and towards coping).
- Costs associated with investigations of ill treatment, potential legal action and loss of company reputation.

Bullies do not run good organizations; staff turnover and sick leave will be high while morale and productivity will be low. Stress, depression and physical health problems result in costly time away from work.

The health problems experienced by targets of bullying result in a sense of helplessness and negative emotional states. Low self-esteem and a negative organizational climate suppress creativity and hamper employees' abilities to respond to difficult situations or challenging goals.

The breakdown of trust in a bullying environment may mean that employees will fail to contribute their best work, do not give extra ideas for improvement, do not provide feedback on failures and may be less honest about performance.

Bullying is Different from Harassment

Harassment is one type of illegal discrimination and is defined as offensive and unwelcome conduct, serious enough to adversely affect the terms and conditions of a person's employment, which occurs because of the person's protected class, and can be imputed to the employer. Protected classes in the employment context are race/color, creed (religion), national origin, sex, marital status, disability, HIV/AIDS or Hepatitis C status, sexual orientation/gender identity, and honorably discharged veteran and military status.

An example of harassment could be when an employee tells racist jokes and refers to a particular co-worker or group of co-workers by using racial slurs, and after a complaint, the employer does nothing to stop the behavior. Another example of harassment could be a male manager who makes unwelcome sexual suggestions to a female employee or touches her inappropriately.

Bullying also differs from retaliation, which occurs after a person makes a complaint of illegal discrimination, and is then the subject of an adverse employment action or subjected to harassment because he or she made the complaint.

Bullying, on the other hand, is often directed at someone a bully feels threatened by. The target often doesn't even realize when they are being bullied because the behavior is covert, through trivial criticisms and isolating actions that occur behind closed doors. While harassment is illegal, bullying in the workplace is not.

What Can be Done About Bullying?

- Create a zero tolerance anti-bullying policy. This policy should be part of the wider commitment to a safe and healthful working environment and should have the full support of top management.
- When witnessed or reported, the bullying behavior should be addressed IMMEDIATELY.
- If bullying is entrenched in the organization, complaints need to be taken seriously and investigated promptly. Reassignment of the bully may be necessary.
- Structure the work environment to incorporate a sense of autonomy, individual challenge/mastery, and clarity of task expectations for employees. Include employees in decision-making processes.
- Hold awareness campaigns for EVERYONE on what bullying is. Encourage reporting.
- Ensure management has an active part in the staff they supervise, rather than being far removed from them.
- Encourage open door policies.
- Investigate the extent and nature of the problem.
- Improve management's ability and sensitivity towards dealing with and responding to conflicts.
- Establish an independent contact for employees (e.g., Human Resources contact).