

When the Bully Sits in the Next Cubicle

An eye roll, a glare, a dismissive snort — these are the tactics of the workplace bully. They don't sound like much, but that's why they are so insidious. How do you complain to human resources that your boss is picking on you? Who cares that a co-worker won't return your phone calls?

Bullying in the workplace is surprisingly common. In a survey released last fall, 37 percent of American workers said they had experienced bullying on the job, according to the research firm Zogby International.

Unlike the playground bully, who often resorts to physical threats, the work bully sets out on a course of constant but subtle harassment. It may start with a belittling comment at a staff meeting. Later it becomes gossip to co-workers and forgetting to invite someone to an important work event. If the bully is a supervisor, victims may be stripped of critical duties, then accused of not doing their job, says Gary Namie, founder of the Workplace Bullying Institute, an advocacy group based in Bellingham, Wash.

This month, researchers at the University of Manitoba reported that the emotional toll of workplace bullying is more severe than that of sexual harassment. And in today's corporate culture, supervisors may condone bullying as part of a tough management style.

But the tide may be turning, thanks in part to a best-selling book by Robert I. Sutton, a management professor and co-director of the Center for Work, Technology and Organization at Stanford. Among other things, the book argues that workplace bullies are bad for business, because they lead to absenteeism and turnover.

The New York State Legislature is considering an antibullying bill, and in several other states, including New Jersey and Connecticut, lawmakers have introduced such measures — without success so far. A measure was withdrawn in Connecticut last week after business groups opposed it, although the bill is expected to be resubmitted.

Business groups often argue that existing laws are adequate to protect workers. But bullying generally does not involve race, age or sex, which have protected status in the courts. Instead, most workplace hostility occurs just because someone doesn't like someone else.

"Many of these situations fall between the cracks of existing state and federal employment law," said David C. Yamada, a professor at the Suffolk Uni-

versity Law School in Boston, who has drafted antibullying legislation. "There is a real gap in the law that someone could be tormented and subjected to humiliation and really be suffering because of it, but the courts are saying it's not severe enough for us to allow the lawsuit to go forward."

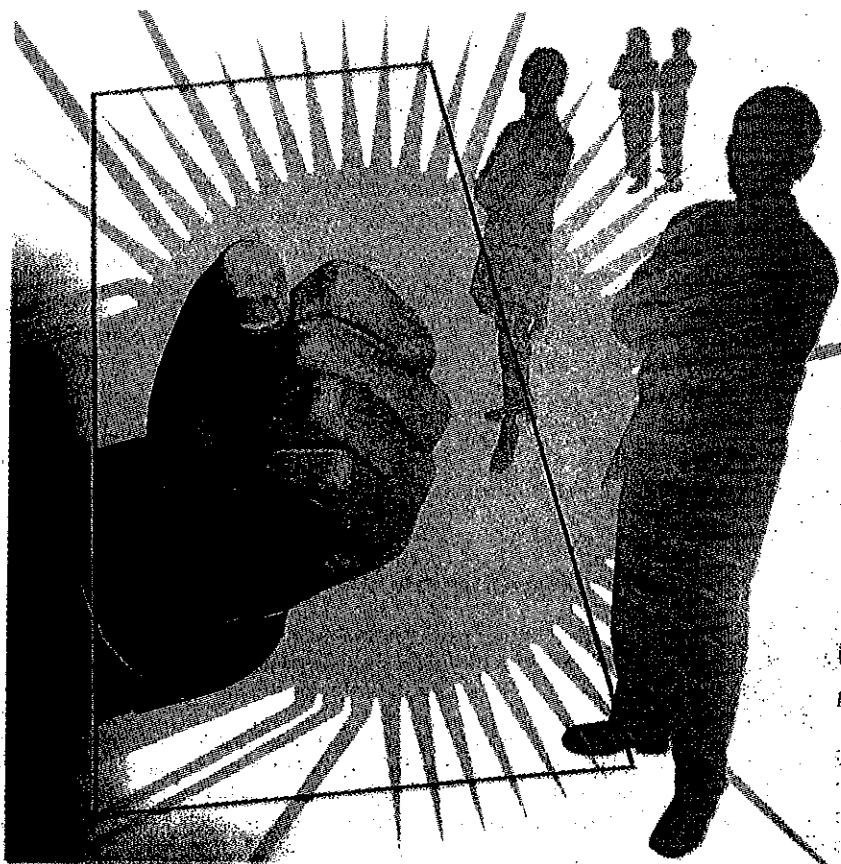
The antibullying bills are often referred to as "healthy workplace" legislation. The name is more palatable to businesses, but they also acknowledge the serious health toll bullying can have. Some victims become physically ill from the stress, with depression, anxiety and even symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Surveys also suggest that victims of office bullies call in sick more often — although it's not clear whether they really are sick or just avoiding the abusive environment at work.

his high technical skills, she cut off all contact with him.

"She gave this employee totally inappropriate assignments, setting him up to fail, and then punished him when he could not complete the assignments," said the reader, who asked not to be named. "She eventually did not invite this employee to the Christmas party." The worker finally quit.

Still, it can be hard to distinguish between normal personality disputes and the incessant torture of workplace bullying.

Researchers at the State University of New York in New Paltz have developed a survey aimed at identifying the full range of behaviors that can constitute bullying. (For a list, go to www.nytimes.com/well.) Some of the behaviors — glaring, failing to return calls,



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A surprising number of bullying cases involve health care settings, where the problem is said to be endemic, with senior hospital workers, particularly doctors and supervisors, harassing nurses and technicians. The problem is also common in academia and the legal profession, experts say.

A large share of the problem involves women victimizing women. The Zogby survey showed that 40 percent of workplace bullies are women.

This month, more than 300 readers of the Well blog posted their own stories of workplace bullies. One reader shared a story of an assistant manager who became angry with an employee. Despite

not praising a worker — may seem trivial, but they take a toll when repeated over and over again.

"Imagine yourself sitting at a conference table and you offer something as a suggestion and someone looks at you and shakes their head every time," said Joel H. Neuman, director of the center for applied management at the SUNY-New Paltz School of Business.

"It can be damaging to be constantly dismissed in front of your peers," Dr. Neuman said. "The thing that is upsetting about it is that people come to expect it and say, 'Well, this is what it's like around here.' It shouldn't be part of the culture, but often it is."

ONLINE: FIRST PERSON

Video interviews with a victim of workplace bullying, and an expert: nytimes.com/science

E-mail: well@nytimes.com



Are You Being Bullied at Your Office?

Find Out What Constitutes Bullying In the Workplace and What You Can Do

By TORY JOHNSON

March 26, 2008 —

Nearly 40 percent of American workers say they have experienced workplace bullying, according to a new study by research firm Zogby International.

A University of Minnesota report released earlier this month found the emotional toll associated with workplace bullying can be more severe than that of sexual harassment.

While sexual harassment is illegal, workplace bullying currently is not. But new legislation aimed at changing that has been introduced in several states.

Bullying in the workplace takes so many forms. Among them:

Humiliating comments or actions: Making comments or taking action desired to humiliate you is a form of bullying. In a meeting or at the water cooler, you offer what you think is a good idea. A bully smirks and calls you a moron. A bully laughs at you or mocks you in public.

Excessive yelling: A boss can disapprove of your performance. A boss can be upset if you're repeatedly late. But none of that is an excuse to be a screamer -- in private or in front of others. Yelling repeatedly is a bully tactic.

Undermining your status at work: This includes withholding key information from you. Excluding you from an e-mail distribution once could be an oversight. Doing it consistently, or always intentionally leaving you out of meetings when you ought to be in the loop, is the pattern of a bully.

Failing to give credit: Just as damaging is failing to give you the credit you're due. If you're working diligently and producing results but the boss or a colleague refuses to acknowledge you or your contribution on an ongoing basis -- as if you simply don't exist -- that's bullying.

There are steps workers can take to stop bullies from continuing to target them.

Stop it on the spot: If you can, nip it on the spot. People who bully do it because they can, and they won't stop until someone stops them. So if you're feeling strong, tell them firmly and directly, "Don't speak to me that way. I'm professional and cordial to you, and I expect the same in return."

Walk away from a tirade: You can also walk away. As a child, you might have had to sit still and take it from an intimidating parent; not so at work. Stand up and excuse yourself. "I have to go to the restroom." "I have an appointment." "I need some water." This is especially useful if you're on the verge of getting emotional which you don't want a bully to witness.

Confront the bully calmly: When you've taken a breath and have had a chance to compose your thoughts, calmly confront the bully. Cite examples of the behavior that has been humiliating or demeaning and state that you expect it to stop. No name calling, just facts delivered in a reasoned manner.

Document the abuse: Documenting bully behavior is really important. Without the facts of when, where, witnesses and so on all clearly spelled out in writing you risk being brushed off as a petty complainer or tattletale. You can sound like you're upset that someone is picking on you or that you're thin-skinned. Going to HR or a top manager is serious -- and to be taken seriously you want to present the facts. Facts are much harder to dispute and to ignore than emotions. And by putting everything in writing as it happens, you're less likely to forget key details.

Find a new job: If management doesn't help you, find a new job. No job is worth risking your mental and physical health -- or repeated blows to your self-esteem. You must control your sanity and your self-worth -- and that sometimes means removing yourself from a culture or situation where you believe both are in jeopardy.

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