

A MATTER OF RESPECT

Respect is one of the many leading topics in today's workplace. It is the cornerstone and very foundation of all employment relationships. Issues of respect in workplaces are receiving increasing attention as poor attitude, harassment and bullying have caused organizations to examine the effect these behaviours have on workplace issues like performance, quality, productivity, interpersonal relationships and costs.

Bullying of an employee in the workplace by another employee can poison a work culture at many levels. Bullying is a behaviour that creates fear in others or coerces others through fear, force or threats. At times people feel persecuted because of bullying behaviours.

The Americans describe bullying as "mobbing" and define it as "an emotional assault". It begins when an individual becomes the target of disrespectful and harmful behaviour(s). Through innuendo, rumours, and public discrediting, a hostile environment is created in which one individual, willingly or unwillingly, participates in continuous malevolent actions to force a person out of the workplace.¹ These types of actions lead to behaviours that become out of control in the workplace. No one person really knows the individual next to them, what their tolerance for stress is or what their reaction to cumulative stress might be.

An employee who is the victim of bullying often feels confused, frustrated with his/her work environment, tired, depressed, alone and incompetent in a job they may have performed well for many years. All of these feelings may contribute to the eventual resignation or dismissal of this employee if employers are not educated in the recognition, acknowledgement and resolution of this difficult workplace problem. "*Bullying is the victimization of one's soul.*"² People who are bullied have described their feelings as someone ripping the heart and soul from their body. However, on the other hand, bullies may not be aware of the effect their behaviours have on other people or even that their behaviours would be considered to be bullying behaviours.

Many of you while reading this article may think bullying is a situation that only occurs in schools with children. While the school systems definitely have their challenges with bullying behaviours, workplaces do as well. Conflict is a natural occurrence whenever people work together because of differing points of view, values, culture and learned behaviours. Bullying is one behaviour that an individual may have had all his or her life without being addressed, whether because of fear of school personnel or parents' inability to recognize and deal with this behaviour, or because one or other parent exhibited this behaviour in the home and the child mimicked the behaviour. Because it was never addressed; the behaviour never changed. These children grow to be adults in our

¹ Davenport et al 1999

² Davenport et al 1999

workplaces and their behaviours continue until recognized and addressed. Although now ingrained, this learned behaviour is more difficult to change.

Today's managers are challenged with these types of issues in their departments and are often unprepared to accept or deal with these issues when they surface.³ Their premise is that they have a number of adults working together, so why can they not behave like adults instead of like school children? Managers become frustrated because they often do not believe, or do not want to believe, that bullying would actually occur amongst a group of adults.

Typically responses might include:

- "You must have done something to cause the other person to treat you this way."
- "Forget about it. Go back to work and get your job done."
- "If you both don't get it together, I will discipline the both of you."

Organizations too, are becoming more frustrated with the challenges these types of issues bring to all levels of the organization. On the very frontlines, bullying between employees create difficult relationships, hurt feelings and mental health issues for the victim which also contributes to the decline of production and quality in the job. In turn, bullying affects relationships on a team and in a department. It can cause others to become involved and/or take sides, causing the issues to grow and develop into a mob mentality.

The effects bullying can have on an organizational level are astounding and frustrating for senior level executives. If bullying is not recognized, addressed, and resolved this mob mentality can permeate a workplace culture. This makes the work environment hostile and difficult. It costs organizations through lost time and associated costs. In fact, a pattern of leave can be easily recognized for victims of bullying as they often come to work but leave part way through a shift or avoid working on days that a certain individual(s) is scheduled to work with them.

It costs organizations in decreased productivity and quality of work. The target client, patient or resident care suffers in some way. Other costs include consultants to diagnose, address and assist in a plan of action to address bullying. Organizations can also have increased legal costs as well as grievance and arbitration costs.⁴

Organizations must take a proactive stand to deal with situations of bullying, disrespect and harassment in the workplace. Managers must be trained in recognition of these issues, understand how to deal with conflict and how to coach employees in developing better on-the-job relationships. Leadership skill development is a necessity for any manager today to model good leadership behaviour, communications, problem solving and relationship building for their employees.

³ Frost 2003

⁴ Davenport et al 1999

The public sector may be more vulnerable to experiencing issues of respect as the public sector goes through constant change and has large work areas where the work is often rote in nature. Health care environments may be susceptible, particularly in departments such as housekeeping, dietary and laundry.⁵

Think of situations in your own workplace....

- Do these challenges ever occur in your particular work area?
- Do you often throw up your hands in frustration because you are unsure what to do about a frustrating situation?
- You know these situations – do you ever label these employees as “difficult” employees?
- Do you ever avoid difficult or aggressive employees or fear dealing with them?
- Do you feel equipped to deal with bullying in your department? Organization?

Luckily there are proactive steps organizations can take to address the issue of bullying in the workplace. The St. John’s Nursing Home Board has been working hard to achieve a proactive stance in issues of workplace respect. Here are some proactive suggestions for your workplace:

1. Develop a comprehensive organizational policy for a Respectful Workplace – include definitions of harassment and bullying. Outline policy and procedures simply and clearly. Include employees at all levels of the organization in the development of this policy. Bring your unions on side. Train all management in the application of the policy, all union representatives and all staff in what a respectful workplace is as well as in the use of the policy.
2. Develop a management training program in your workplace that assists managers in developing leadership skills, problem solving skills and an understanding of the intricacies of human interaction and motivation.
3. Ensure that the organization has a visible and accessible Employee and Family Assistance Program.
4. Ensure that the organization has a Conflict Resolution Program including mediation services for all and conflict coaching for managers.
5. Ensure that communication in the organization is clear and consistent at all levels. This is particularly important during times of rapid change.
6. Ensure that employees have up to date job descriptions and know how to execute their roles on a team.
7. Ensure that there is a quality initiatives program to assist departments in setting, reaching, and measuring goals and identifying obstacles to goal achievement.
8. Ensure that there is a quality Performance Appraisal System in place so that employees receive regular feedback on their work performance and their contribution to the organization.
9. Address all problems/issues in a timely and consistent manner.

⁵ Davenport et al 1999
Frost 2003
Globe and Mail November 2003

10. Ensure that employees know that they contribute to the importance and success of the organization.
11. Develop an awareness campaign around issues of respect in the workplace.
12. Most importantly, model respect: talk the talk and walk the walk of a Respectful Work Environment.

While issues of respect and bullying are not new concepts to organizations, they are surfacing more often due to constant change, fast paced workplaces and managerial issues regarding education. These issues are interfering with the execution and success of organizational business plans. We must recognize the issues and be proactive.

For more information of Respectful Workplaces, Conflict Resolution, Conflict Coaching and/or Bullying in the Workplace please contact:

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR

Gail Carroll is the Director of Employee Support Programs with the St. John's Nursing Home Board. Gail's portfolio of responsibility includes the Employee and Family Assistance Program, Employee Wellness, Attendance Support, Respectful Workplace and Conflict Resolution. Gail is a graduate of Memorial University. She has also studied at the University of Windsor and the University of Calgary.

Gail is a registered social worker and an active member of IPMA (International Personnel Management Association). Gail is an experienced facilitator and mediator with a Certificate in Alternate Dispute Resolution and Advanced Alternate Dispute Resolution from the University of Windsor Law School and a Certificate in Conflict Coaching from Cinergy. Gail is currently coaching the Mediation and Dispute Resolution Program administered by Stitt, Feld and Handy Group. She has a history of a wide range of work experiences and her education is varied in areas such as employment relations, conflict resolution, mediation, change management, mental health and addictions assessment and counseling, and community and organizational development. Gail also has an interest in complementary therapies and has fostered her interest in this area through a Level III Certificate in Healing Touch as well as studying Aromatherapy through the Michael Scholes School of Aromatic Studies in Los Angeles, California.

Gail is an experienced conference planner, facilitator and presenter with experience on a local, provincial and national basis.

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