

WORKPLACE TRAUMA

BY Joyce Gregg & Harold Steven

At first glance the phrase, Workplace Trauma, appears to be an oxymoron. The workplace should be an environment of productivity, and trauma indicates a type of debilitation. How can these two words exist so comfortably in the same sentence?

If anything the relationship between these words accurately describes a workplace atmosphere where the crippling impact of bullying behavior is felt throughout the entire organization.

Workplace trauma is often the result of a pattern of abusive and or violent behavior that one or more employees use to maintain power and control over another employee in a persistent manner over an extended period of time. The similarities between the behavior of the workplace bully and the conduct of an abuser in a domestic violent relationship are startling as both attempt to control others through abusive behavior and faulty thinking. The consequences of both can be as debilitating as any other post traumatic stress disorder.

Although anyone within the organization can use bullying behavior from the secretary to the CEO as a method of control, statistics indicates that generally controlling behavior is exerted from the top down. Oftentimes a supervisor, general manager or someone in authority uses his or her position as leverage to gain and maintain control of another employee. Put downs, insults, intimidation, sarcasm and threats are some of the tools of emotional abuse used by the bully to "keep you in your place". Many incidents take place in private and happen only between the bully and his victim without witnesses present, however even when co-workers recognize the unfairness it is not seen as abusive behavior. The bully is able to deliver the emotional abuse with just enough humorous sarcasm to convince onlookers that "It was nothing more than a joke"; "he is such a wimp" and it all appears to be for fun. The relationship between the target and the bully has taken some time to cultivate and regardless of how abusive behavior is delivered, it always finds its mark. In a domestic abusive relationship, 'a certain look' may contain even greater pain psychologically in anticipatory abuse than the actual physical assault that follows.

You may see the results of emotional abuse with greater clarity than the actual process of bullying that brought it about. Caution is again exercised because it's all too easy to minimize it away as, " it's just stress". Ongoing emotional abuse can lead to a variety of physical and emotional symptoms including headaches, gastrointestinal problems, feelings of isolation, anxiety, inability to concentrate and depression. At its most powerful impact, emotional abuse can lead to suicide.

Clearly, this drama is about relationships. In fact the health of any company can be seen in the morale amongst its most important resource, the people, and how they interact with one another. When bullies exist in an organization and practice unhealthy abusive behavior, their performance is a major contributor to the emotional health of the general workforce. Given the basic guiding principle of relationships, a relationship cannot be any healthier than the least emotionally healthy person in it, the bully is responsible for weakening the glue that holds a company together, its morale.

Trauma does not just begin in the workplace. Often, it begins in the family. Someone has said that any behaviour less than nurturing is somewhat abusive. Often, bullying takes place because the target is somewhat different. He or she might be very smart, good at sports or have very good people skills. The person may be very young or a senior.

We are all aware that bullying takes place in the school or school yard. This same behaviour moves on into the workplace. Bullying is America's Silent Epidemic sapping productivity. One in five U.S. workers has experienced destructive bullying in the past year.

The Reasons for Bullying:

The bully has a need for control. The bully often withholds resources such as time, information or supplies so that the target cannot succeed. Often the bully has been a target elsewhere.

Many companies have a Personal & Sexual Harassment Policy. It is helpful to have this posted so employees are well aware of the steps to be taken should they be victimized by a bully.

Likewise, it is important to be proactive and to become aware through education about bullying. It is very important to create a safe working environment, and there needs to be a policy of confidentiality for victims of bullying.

For the target:

- Keep a notebook of dates and events. Speak to the bully with a witness present and inform him/her of the policy.
- If these consequences don't stop the bullying, employers may consider dismissal.
- Lately, there has been considerable attention given by the press to workplace bullying. This has increased awareness and concern. Personally, I was encouraged to learn last fall of a Panel Discussion at K.V.H.S. entitled "Teens Against Teenage Harassment." The panel included a Faculty Advisor, a Guidance Counsellor, a Nurse, a Clergyman, a person who spoke on racial issues, one who spoke on sexual orientation, a Lawyer, a Counsellor and a parent of a student.

The Committee developed a questionnaire and looked at the impact of harassment on the Perpetrator, the victim and other students. The students reported that workshops about bullying were helpful.

Some say the only effective way to stop bullying is to remove the stressor; but, that does not always happen. As in other types of abuse, breaking the silence or secret can be a beginning, and there is a responsibility for educators to provide a safe environment. **Call today for more information or a confidential appointment!**

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