# HUMAN RESOURCE ROLE IN HANDLING WORKPLACE BULLYING ISSUES

## K. HARI HARA RAJU[1] & JALADI. RAVI[2]

[1]Post-Doctoral Fellow (UGC), Department of Commerce & Management Studies,

Andhra University, Visakhapatnam, India

[2] Professor, Department of Commerce & Management Studies,

Andhra University, Visakhapatnam, India

## ABSTRACT

Workplace bullying can have a serious negative impact on individuals and on companies, but is unfortunately common. Everyone in a company benefits from recognizing and stopping workplace bullying. If you are a bully or being bullied at work keeps reading to learn how to stop. Workplace bullying is when one a person or group of people in a workplace single out another person for unreasonable, embarrassing, or intimidating treatment. Usually the bully is a person in a position in authority who feels threatened by the victim, but in some cases the bully is a co-worker who is insecure or immature. Workplace bullying can be the result of a single individual acting as a bully or of a company culture that allows or even encourages this kind of negative behavior. The present paper deals with the concept of bullying, types, and HR role in work place bullying issues. The paper mainly based on secondary data.

**KEYWORDS:** Work Place, Bullying, Company

## INTRODUCTION

The word "bully" can be traced back as far as the 1530s. (Harper, 2008). In its most basic sense bullying involves two people, a bully or intimidator and a victim. The bully abuses the victim through physical, verbal, or other means in order to gain a sense of superiority and power. These actions may be direct (i.e. hitting, verbally assaulting face-to-face, etc.) or indirect (i.e. rumors, gossip, etc.).

## ORIGINS OF BULLYING

The desire to survive is instinctual and common among all living things. Survival is associated directly with competition due to the multitude of species and limited natural resources on the planet. Since the beginning of time there has been a constant drive to out-perform others and overcome obstacles. This survival instinct, along with a competitive atmosphere, has remained the same as the human race has evolved. Both of these forces have flowed over into the educational, social, and economic realms. This competitive hierarchy, though prevalent in most societies, varies across cultures depending on their ethical systems, traditions, and the type of control exerted by the government. Unfortunately, the U.S. capitalistic society inadvertently pushes the belief that success and wealth go hand in hand. This ideology has shaped a nation where bullying is unintentionally instilled as a survival tactic from a very young age.

From the time an American child enters grade school, he or she is taught to be the best he or she can. This seemingly innocent lesson can morph as a child develops throughout his or her education. Students often learn corrupt ways to get ahead in the highly competitive educational and social environments that grade school presents. These bullying

tactics may include pressuring others for answers on assignments to attain higher grades, which leads toward better college opportunities, or spreading social rumors about fellow students. These tactics are dangerous because once a student realizes their effectiveness, he or she may construct a life style from them. Developing a habitual use of bullying tactics can lead to negatively affecting a countless number of people as well as corruption in the workplace.

**Review of Research**

The subject of workplace bullying is receiving increasing attention among both academics and policymakers. Its emergence in Ireland can be traced to the late 1990s and since then, workplace bullying has been the subject of growing academic interest (O'Moore et al., 1998; Coyne et al., 2000; O'Connell and Williams, 2002), as well as governmental consideration (Taskforce on the Prevention of Workplace Bullying, 2001; Report of the Expert Advisory Group on Workplace Bullying, 2005).

Some of the earliest studies on the topic of workplace bullying or 'mobbing' were carried out by Scandinavian researchers during the 1980s (Leymann, 1996), which built on previous research regarding bullying at schools among children (Olweus, 1978; Heinemann, 1972). As well as increased attention in Scandinavia throughout the 1990s (Bjorkqvist et al., 1994; Einarsen et al., 1994; Einarsen and Skogstad, 1996; Leymann, 1996) research was carried out in other European countries such as Germany (Zapf, Knorz et al., 1996; Zapf, 1999), Austria (Niedl, 1996) and the Netherlands (Hubert, 1996).

In the UK, workplace bullying received increased attention in the 1990s in various media, largely driven by dedicated BBC radio programmes (Lee, 2000). One of the earliest UK texts on the subject was mainly aimed at employees to assist in developing appropriate strategies to counteract bullying (Adams and Crawford, 1992). The mid to late 1990s saw several large scale empirical studies of employees, carried out by trade unions, for example MSF and UNISON, and professional bodies such the Institute of Personnel and Development. The BBC sponsored a survey of part time students at a university (Rayner, 1997) and Quine conducted a survey of over 1000 employees in the National Health Service (1999). In 2002, leading UK scholars in the field published a comprehensive book, which aimed to address both the theoretical, empirical and practical aspects of the issue (Rayner et al., 2002).

Workplace bullying has now been studied systematically internationally with studies in Australia (McCarthy et al., 1996) and America (Keashley and Jagatic, 2003). The European research tradition has continued into this decade (Einarsen, 2000; Vartia and Hytti, 2002; Piirainen et al., 2003; Hogh et al., 2005), with an increased amount of cross-country collaboration (Einarsen et al., 2003; Varhama and Bjorkqvist, 2004). In 2003, the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions published a report reviewing the European research concerning both violence and harassment in the workplace. (Di Martino et al., 2003).

Empirical research on bullying in Ireland was relatively sparse until the early 2000s, although there were some surveys of specific occupational group surveys carried out, among, and for example, nurses (Condell, 1995) and teachers (TUI, 1999; ASTI, 1999). However, the topic gained increasing recognition with Costigan's (1998) practitioner-focused text Bullying and Harassment in the Workplace and the establishment of the Anti-Bullying Centre (ABC) in 1996 in Trinity College Dublin (Sheehan, 1999). The ABC carried out an early exploratory study in 1998, utilizing a self-referred sample of thirty victims of workplace bullying in Ireland (O' Moore et al., 1998).

Coyne et al. (2000) conducted a study investigating the extent to which personality traits can predict workplace bullying victim status. In addition, two large scale national surveys were carried out (O'Moore, 2000; O'Connell and Williams, 2001) and smaller scale surveys of the health sector (Seague, 2004; Cheema, 2006) have also been conducted in recent years. 2006 saw Trinity College Dublin host the Fifth International Conference on Bullying and Harassment in the Workplace, bringing together leading scholars from all over the world.

The first issue to consider is the terminology itself. A variety of terms have been employed to describe the concept internationally, for example, 'victimisation' is largely used in the USA to describe the phenomenon (Keasley, 1998). The Scandinavian and German literature largely addresses the topic of 'mobbing'1 while 'bullying' is the preferred term in English speaking countries. While distinctions have been drawn between these different terms (Leymann, 1996; Zapf, 1999) there is widespread argument that they essentially refer to the same phenomenon (Einarsen, 1999; Einarsen et al., 2003). Einarsen et al., (2003), building on previous research (Einarsen and Skogstad, 1996; Leymann, 1996; Zapf, 1999) offer a definition of bullying which other scholars have welcomed as a useful collaborative contribution to progressing research on the issue (McCarthy and Mayhew, 2004):

Bullying at work means harassing, offending, socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone's work tasks. In order for the label bullying (or mobbing) to be applied to a particular activity, interaction or process it has to occur repeatedly and regularly (e.g. weekly) and over a period of time (e.g. about six months). Bullying is an escalating process in the course of which the person confronted ends up in an inferior position and becomes the target of systematic negative social acts. A conflict cannot be called bullying if the incidence is an isolated event or if two parties of approximately equal 'strength' are in conflict (Einarsen et al., 2003, p.15)2

There are a number of elements to this definition which have been identified as key: frequency; duration; nature of behaviours; subjective/objective dimension, intentionality; interpersonal/organisational bullying; and bullying as process (Einarsen et al., 2003). As this definition indicates, there is a general consensus amongst researchers that workplace bullying must encompass a dual time dimension. First, the behaviour must be a repeated, rather than an isolated, event. While it is recognized that one off incidences do occur and often have far reaching consequences for the individual concerned, bullying is defined as something which happens repeatedly. However, it has been noted that certain types of behaviour do not 'fit' this time related criteria. Second, the durational aspect of bullying has been emphasized in order to differentiate it from 'normal' social stress in the workplace (Einarsen and Skogstad, 1996; Vartia, 1996; Zapf et al., 1996). Einarsen et al. (2003) note that these two time dimensions of bullying are closely related, with those who experience bullying regularly reporting a longer duration than those reporting bullying less frequently, thus fitting in with the 'conflict escalation' model proposed by researchers (Zapf and Gross, 2001; Matthiesen et al., 2003).

Zapf (1999) identified five main types of behaviour which constitute the most frequent and usual aspects of workplace bullying: work-related bullying which may include: (i) changing work tasks, being given demeaning work tasks, withholding job related information, removal f areas of responsibility or excessive monitoring; (ii) social isolation; (iii) personal attacks by ridicule or insult; (iv) verbal threats; and (v) spreading rumours. This recognises that bullying is often subtle and does not have to include a physical aspect, which is often reported less frequently than the above behaviours (Einarsen, 1999; Zapf, 1999). For example, Vartia and Hyyti (2002) found that gossip, spreading of rumours and devaluation of the worker's contribution to the job or the job itself were some of the most common forms of bullying reported by prison officers in Finland.

Further breaking down Zapf's five main categories of behaviour, various typologies have been proposed: direct action such as verbal abuse versus indirect action, for example, spreading rumours (Einarsen et al., 1994; O'Moore et al., 1998) while a distinction has been drawn between work related bullying and personal bullying (Einarsen and Hoel, 2001).

Drawing on the work of Felson and Tedeschi (1993), Einarsen (1999) differentiated between two different types: predatory bullying and dispute related bullying. The former refers to cases when the victim has done nothing to incite the attention of a bully but is attacked purely by chance or through membership of an 'outsider' group, such as the first female officer in a Fire Service division. The second relates to bullying which is a consequence, and escalation, of an interpersonal conflict at work.

As in the research concerning sexual harassment (Fitzgerald and Shullman, 1993) intentionality is a key issue. Some scholars argue that there must be 'intent to cause harm' (Bjorkquist et al., 1994) while others note the difficulty in ascertaining this (Hoel et al., 1999). While Einarsen et al.'s (2003) definition cited above clearly avoids dependency on the intentionality of the perpetrator; however, its authors note the debate surrounding the issue.

In addition, it is widely recognised in the literature that bullying can occur along different planes: horizontal (i.e. bullying by colleagues) and vertical (i.e. downward - bullying by superiors or upward - by subordinates).

Einarsen et al. (2003) draw the distinction between bullying which could be termed interpersonal as opposed to organisational bullying. Interpersonal is meant as a 'dynamic interaction' between at least two parties (p.13). Organisational bullying (Liefooghe and Davey, 2001) or 'structural mobbing' (Neuberger, 1999 cited in Einarsen et al., 2003) are terms intended to capture bullying in which repeated organisational practices are perceived as 'oppressive, demeaning and humiliating'. Einarsen et al. caution about the overuse or misuse of the bullying term (2003, p.13). However, Liefooghe and Davey (2001) found that employee accounts of bullying specifically included organisational procedures.

Einarsen (1999) has been at the forefront of identifying bullying as a gradually evolving process, with his identification of four stages: (i) aggressive behaviour; (ii) bullying; (iii) stigmatisation; and (iv) severe trauma. In addition, heeargues that bullying can be explained as an interaction between the (mainly) two parties involved, thus the target is not the 'passive recipient' but rather there is a pattern of 'action and reaction'. Leymann (1996) also argues that bullying should be understood as an 'escalating conflict'.

## WHAT IS BULLYING?

Bullying is persistent unwelcome behaviour, mostly using unwarranted or invalid criticism, fault-finding, also exclusion, isolation, being singled out and treated differently, being shouted at, humiliated, excessive monitoring, having verbal and written warnings imposed, and much more.

## WHAT IS WORKPLACE BULLYING?

Workplace bullying means any behaviour that is repeated, systematic and directed towards an employee or group of employees that a reasonable person, having regard to the circumstances, would expect to victimize, humiliate, undermine or threaten and which creates a risk to health and safety.

Bullying is usually seen as acts or verbal comments that could 'mentally' hurt or isolate a person in the workplace. Sometimes, bullying can involve negative physical contact as well. Repeated incidents or a pattern of behaviour that is

intended to intimidate, offend, degrade or humiliate a particular person or group of people. Assertion of power through aggression.

## WHAT ARE BULLYING ISSUES?

- Spreading malicious rumors, gossip, or inference that is not true
- Excluding or isolating someone socially
- Threatening a person
- Undermining or deliberately impeding a person's work
- Physically abusing or threatening abuse
- Removing areas of responsibilities without cause
- Frequently changing work guidelines
- Establishing impossible deadlines that will set up the individual to fail
- Withholding necessary information or purposefully giving the wrong information.
- Making jokes that are 'obviously offensive' by spoken word or e-mail
- Interrupting on a person's privacy by harassment, spying or irritation
- Assigning unreasonable duties or workload which are unfavourable to one person (in a way that creates unnecessary pressure)
- Criticizing a person persistently or constantly
- Belittling / Depreciate  a person's opinions
- Unwarranted (or undeserved) punishment
- Blocking applications for training, leave or promotion
- Tampering with a person's personal belongings or work equipment

## TYPES OF BULLYING

- **Corporate Bullying** is where the employer abuses employees with freedom knowing that the law is weak and jobs are scarce
- **Pressure Bullying** or **Unwitting Bullying** is where the stress of the moment causes behaviour to decline;
- **Organizational Bullying** is a combination of pressure bullying and corporate bullying
- **Institutional Bullying** is similar to corporate bullying and arises when bullying becomes fixed and accepted as part of the culture.
- **Client Bullying** is where employees are bullied by those they serve

- **Serial Bullying** is where the source of all dysfunction can be traced to one individual, who picks on one employee after another and destroys them

- **Secondary Bullying** is mostly unwitting bullying which people start exhibiting when there's a serial bully in the department

- **Pair Bullying** is a serial bully with a colleague. Often one does the talking at the same time as the other watches and listens

- **Gang Bullying** is a serial bully with colleagues. Gangs can occur anywhere, but flourish in corporate bullying climates

- **Vicarious Bullying** is where two parties are encouraged to engage in adversarial interaction or conflict

- **Regulation Bullying** is where a serial bully forces their target to comply with rules, regulations, procedures or laws regardless of their appropriateness, applicability or necessity. **Legal bullying** - the bringing of a vexatious legal action to control and punish a person - is one of the nastiest forms of bullying

- **Cyber Bullying** is the misuse of email systems or Internet forums etc for sending aggressive flame mails

- **Hierarchical Bullying, Peer Bullying, Upward Bullying**  it is the majority of cases of workplace bullying reported to the UK National Workplace Bullying Advice Line and Bully On Line involve an individual being bullied by their manager, and these account for around 75% of cases

## HOW CAN BULLYING AFFECT AN INDIVIDUAL?

People who are the targets of bullying may experience a range of effects.

These reactions include:

- Shock

- Anger

- Feelings of frustration and/or helplessness

- Loss of confidence

- Physical symptoms such as

  o   Stomach pains

  o   Headaches

- Psychosomatic symptoms such as

  o   Inability to sleep

  o   Loss of appetite

- Panic or anxiety, especially about going to work

  o   Family tension and stress

- o Inability to concentrate, and

- o Low morale and productivity

## HOW CAN BULLYING AFFECT THE WORKPLACE?

Bullying affects the overall "health" of an organization. An "unhealthy" workplace can have many effects. In general these include:

- Increased absenteeism

- Increased employee turnover

- Increased stress

- Increased costs for employee assistance programs (EAPs), recruitment, etc.

- Increased risk for accidents / incidents

- Decreased productivity and motivation

- Decreased morale

- Reduced corporate image and customer confidence, and

- Poorer customer service

## FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO WORKPLACE BULLYING

There are a variety of reasons why a person may bully another person in the workplace. These reasons may include:

**Power**

A person may use their position of power or their physical dominance over those who are perceived to be weaker. The bullying is often dependent upon the perceived power of the bully over their victim.

**Self-Esteem**

Bullies may put down others to boost their own self-esteem and confidence to help deal with personal feelings of inadequacy.

**Difference**

An individual or group may become targets of workplace bullying because others perceive them as being new or different.

**Perceived Threat**

Some people bully others because the other person is perceived as a threat to them personally, or a threat to their position within the company.

**Organizational Culture**

Employees may find themselves in a negative culture where inappropriate behaviors and attitudes are encouraged or condoned by management and bullying is seen as normal behaviour for the majority of people in the workplace.

**HR'S role in Handling Work Place Bullying Promoting a Positive Workplace Culture**

Understanding and awareness of the issue and the far-reaching effects of bullying is an essential step to creating a positive work culture and minimizing the risk to health and safety posed by bullying behaviour.

## SENIOR MANAGEMENT COMMITMENT

- Actively endorsing a bullying policy

- Making it clear that bullying in the workplace will not be tolerated

- Ensuring that complaints of bullying are taken seriously and properly investigated

- Management is committed to a bullying-free environment

- Modeling positive behaviours of respect and courtesy

- Promoting the Values and Code of Conduct

- Consulting with staff at all levels

## DEVELOPING A BULLYING POLICY AND RELATED PROCEDURES

- Providing high quality learning and development programmes on leadership and people management, which include practical tips for encouraging a culture of mutual respect

- Establishing clear statements and guidelines on appropriate workplace conduct

- Involving employees in the processes that promote a positive workplace culture

- Giving employees the opportunity to participate in workplace surveys, consultations, team meetings and focus groups18

## COMMUNICATION AND CONSULTATION

Practical methods of consultation include:

- Direct discussion with staff

- Setting up structured focus groups

- Involving staff in the risk management process

- Inviting comment on policies and proposed procedures.

## INFORM, INSTRUCT AND TRAIN

Use a mix of information, instruction and training to promote and develop a positive work culture and reduce the risk of bullying in your workplace.

- How to comply with related policies and procedures

- Measures used to prevent bullying

- How your organization deals with bullying behaviour

- How to access support or advice

## CONCLUSIONS

Bullying is deeply engrained in American culture. Our society illustrates the pinnacle of capitalistic competition. This win-or-die-trying atmosphere, the competitive college acceptance process, and much of the corporate world, contribute too many of the bullying problems that we battle today. The issues of bullying and cyberbullying can only be contained in the short term and not eliminated completely due to how deep-seeded they have become in our competitive society troubling issue at hand. The permanent mental effects are what both the law and prevention programs are striving to eliminate. The fact that these initial emotional responses to bullying in any form have been proven to escalate to the point of suicidal thoughts and violent response is the primary reason for why this issue has become a matter of pressing public concern. The thought of children getting so caught up in the psychological battery of bullying that they commit suicide is extremely troubling, an issue that must be dealt with. Though the legislative and judicial branches at both the state and federal levels are having a difficult time adapting laws to encompass cyberbullying as technology advances, there is assurance in the fact that the issue is a pressing concern. Ideally, laws will develop in correspondence with technology to help define the problem itself and establish appropriate judicial repercussions.

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