

Workplace Bullying Can Cost Your Company

Workplace bullying is on the increase, and it constitutes a major risk to companies that fail to take action.

If you learn of a bully in your ranks, you need to take immediate steps to mount a serious investigation and take action if the accusations turn out to be valid. The financial future of your company is riding on it, as a bullied employee could sue your firm for failing to take appropriate action.

But cases are not always cut and dry, and you need to have rules to go by if you receive a complaint. Your bullying prevention policy needs to:

- Define what bullying is,
- Provide guidelines for identifying bullying in the workplace, and
- Include action steps if an employee, supervisor or manager is found to be bullying another employee.

Defining bullying

In 1976, San Francisco doctor Carroll Brodsky defined workplace bullying or harassment as:

"Repeated and persistent attempts by one person to torment, wear down, frustrate, or get a reaction from another. It is treatment which persistently provokes, pressures, frightens, intimidates or otherwise discomforts another person."

And Drs. Gary and Ruth Namie, who are behind the website *workplacebullying.org* and are credited with coining the phrase "workplace bullying," described it as:

"Repeated, health-harming mistreatment, verbal abuse, or conduct which is threatening, humiliating, intimidating or sabotage that interferes with work or some combination of the three."

Based on these two definitions, the behavior needs to be repetitive and provoke a strong reaction in the intended victim. On the other hand, it need not be overt, loud or physically threatening. In fact, some of the most offensive bullying can be insidious and known only to the bully and the victim.

Identifying bullies

If you receive a complaint about bullying in the workplace, you'll need to collect evidence, including interviewing other employees who may have witnessed the bullying or who are confidants of the target.

You'll need to document the behavior and evaluate if it rises to the level of your definition of bullying.

Identifying a bully that yells and swears is easy, and others engage in childish pranks such as hiding personal possessions, gluing lockers shut or defacing property.

But some engage in less obvious methods of harassment, such as:

- Giving false or misleading information about fellow employees or subordinates,
- Scapegoating,
- Abusing authority by threatening to or giving poor or undeserved evaluations,
- Stealing credit,
- Giving arbitrary instructions, and
- Threatening untoward consequences for failing to comply with directives.

Responding

Your policy should spell out how employees can file a complaint and your procedures for responding to them, including how you would investigate.

Make sure to include disciplinary procedures you will implement if you have an employee who is found to be harassing others. Depending on the severity, punishment can be light like a warning; or severe, including termination.

Whatever you do, don't ignore complaints of bullying.

The takeaway

The costs for tolerating bullying are many: low morale, absenteeism, high turnover, difficulty recruiting and retaining talented staff, or litigation against the business..

Often the target of the bully is afraid to report such actions for fear that the bullying will get worse. Make sure your policies ensure protection against retaliation from the bully.

Finally, if you have employment practices liability insurance, it may cover the legal fees and court judgments, but you may still have to suffer through depositions, discovery and even a court trial. Prevention and swift action if you discover bullying in your ranks are the best, and cheapest option.

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