The Silent Epidemic: Workplace Bullying

Workplace bullying is the silent epidemic

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[Workplace](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/career" \o "Psychology Today looks at Career) [bullying](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/bullying) has become a silent epidemic North America, one that has huge hidden costs in terms of employee well being and [productivity](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/productivity). Also known as psychological harassment or emotional abuse, bullying involves the conscious repeated effort to wound and seriously harm another person not with violence, but with words and actions. Bullying damages the physical, emotional and mental healthy of the person who is targeted.

The workplace bully abuses power, brings misery to his/her target and endeavors to steal the target's self-confidence. Bullies often involve others using many tactics such as blaming for errors, unreasonable work demands, insults, putdowns, stealing credit, threatening job loss, and discounting accomplishments.

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In two surveys by the Workplace Bullying Institute (WBI) and Zogby International, where bullying was defined as "repeated mistreatment: sabotage by others that prevented work from getting done, verbal abuse, threatening conduct, intimidation and [humiliation](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/embarrassment)," 35% of workers experienced bullying first hand, and 62% of the bullies were men. A Harris Interactive poll conducted in 2011 revealed that 34% of women reported being bullied in the workplace.

Who are these bullies? The WBI concluded that while perpetrators can be found in all ranks within organizations, the vast majority are bosses-managers, supervisors, and executives.

What's the impact of bullying behavior?

Bullies create a terrible toll within an organization. Their behavior leads to increased levels of [stress](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/stress) among employees, higher rates of absenteeism and higher than normal attrition. Because bullies often get results by getting more short-term production out of employees, they are tolerated.  One study by John Medina showed that workers stressed by bullying performed 50% worse on [cognitive](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/cognition) tests. Other studies estimate the financial costs of bullying at more than $200 billion per year.

A study by Dr. Noreen Tehrani, who counseled victims of violence in Northern Ireland, and soldiers returning from overseas combat and victims of workplace, concluded that bullying exhibited similar psychological and physical symptoms-nightmares and extreme anxiety, and a variety of physical ailments.

Swedish researchers, led by Anna Nyberg at the Stress Institute in Stockholm, have published a study in the **Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine** on the issue of leaders' behavior and employee [health](http://www.psychologytoday.com/node/161206). They studied more than 3,100 men over a 10-year period in typical work settings. They found that employees who had managers who were incompetent, inconsiderate, secretive and uncommunicative, the employees were 60% more likely to suffer a heart attack or other life-threatening cardiac condition. By contrast, employees who worked with "good" leaders were 40% less likely to suffer heart problems.  Nyberg said, "for all those who work under managers who they perceive behave strangely, or in any way they don't understand, and they feel stressed, the study confirms this develops into a health risk."

A study of 6,000 British office workers found employees who felt that their supervisors treated them fairly had a 30% lower risk of heart disease. A 2008 meta-analysis of the connection between health and [leadership](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/leadership) by Jana Kuoppala and associates concluded that good leadership was associated with a 27% reduction in sick leave and a 46% reduction in disability pensions. The same study concluded that employees with good leaders were 40% more likely to report the highest levels of psychological well being including lower levels of anxiety and [depression](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/depression/symptoms).

In an article by Richard Williams, Wallace Higgins and Harvey Greenberg, published in the **Boston Globe**, they cited numerous research studies regarding leadership style and the health of employees. They concluded "your boss can cause you stress, induce depression and anxiety or even trigger the onset of serious illnesses. It is not just bad managers who can negatively affect employee health, but it is also the halfhearted and mediocre who put employees on the sick list."And the cost is huge in terms of lost productivity, healthcare costs and employee turnover. The authors argue that a whole new field of litigation in the U.S. is developing-"lawsuits against 'bad bosses' and the organizations that negligently allow them to supervise."

According to the WBI, 40% of the targets of bulling never told their employers, and of those that did, 62% reported that they were ignored. According to Dr. Gary Namie, Research Director at WBI, and author [The Bully at Work: What You Can Do to Stop the Hurt and Reclaim Your Dignity on the Job](http://www.amazon.com/Bully-Work-What-Reclaim-Dignity/dp/1570715343), 81% of employers are either doing nothing to address bullying or actually resisting action when requested to do something.

What are the reasons for this bullying behavior?

Dr. Robert Sutton of Stanford University, and author of  [The No Asshole Rule: Building A Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn't](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidis/ASIN/0446526568" \t "_blank), argues that in business and [sports](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/sport-and-competition) it is assumed that if you are a big winner, you can get away with being a jerk. And overwhelmingly, these "jerks" [his word is stronger] are bosses. Sutton claims this behavior affects the bottom line through increased turnover, absenteeism, decreased commitment and performance. He says the time spent counseling or appeasing these people, consoling victimized employees, reorganizing departments of [teams](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/teamwork) and arranging transfers produce significant hidden costs for the company.

As John Baldoni, author of nine books on leadership, including **Lead By Example**, and **Lead Your Boss**, says bullies may "get employees to comply, but not to commit. Compliance is okay for day-to-day operations, but when an organization is faced with a challenge or even a crisis, you need employees who are willing to go the extra mile. People who work for a bully are biding their time looking for a way out, or a time when the bully will be replaced."

What kind of people are bullies in the workplace?

Lisa M.S. Barrow, author of [In Darkness Light Dawns: Exposing Workplace Bullying,](http://www.amazon.com/Darkness-Light-Dawns-Exposing-Workplace/dp/0615311423) says "Bullies typically possess a Type A[personality](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/personality); they are competitive and appear driven, operating as they do from a sense of urgency. This has its advantages in the workplace but the shadow side of Type A is the tendency to become frustrated and verbally abusive when things don't go according to plan. Impatience and temper tantrums are common for Type A individuals who haven't engaged in t the personal growth required to gain self-awareness, maintain emotional stability and consider situations from multiple points of view.  Because of the bully's "two-faced [nature](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/environment)"--considerate if things are going well and abusive if not--his/her presence in an organization can cause the work environment to become tense. People feel as if they are walking on eggshells around the bully. They feel he/she is a [sleeping](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/sleep) giant, who could, upon waking, explode with [rage](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/anger). Above all, bullies crave power and control, and this craving underlies much of what they do, say and fail to do and say. Bullies use [charm](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/charisma) and deceit to further their own ends and seem oblivious to the trail of damage they leave behind, as long as their appetites for power and control are fulfilled."

Lynn Taylor, author of [Tame Your Terrible Office Tyrant](http://www.amazon.com/Tame-Your-Terrible-Office-Tyrant/dp/0470457643), writes in an article in Psychology Today reports that a 5 year national study of bullying from 2004-9 of psychological traits of bosses, showed that "self-oriented" spiked by 50% to claim the top spot over other characteristics. Taylor reported that 70% of Americans in her survey said "bosses and toddlers with too much power, act alike."

Contrary to conventional [wisdom](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/wisdom), the targets of office bullies are not the new, inexperienced and less confident employees. The targets, according to research, are the highly competent, accomplished, experienced and popular employees. And making them targets makes it harder for them to get notice or reprieve. Independent, experienced workers pose the greatest threat to the bullies. And when bullies find targets that refuse to be controlled and intimidated, they escalate their behavior.

It's possible, as well, that bullying is part of a larger issue of a [growing culture of incivility.](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/wired-success/201011/bullying-and-culture-incivility)

Researchers at the University of California, Berkeley and University of Southern California shows that bosses who are in over their heads are more likely to bully subordinates. That's because feelings of inadequacy trigger them to lash out at others. The researchers found a direct link among supervisors and upper management between self-perceived incompetence and aggression. The findings were gleaned from four separate studies, published in the journal **Psychological Science.**

Is there a relationship between bosses' bullying behavior and [narcissism](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/narcissism)? The incidents of narcissistic bosses such as Bernard Madoff or Ken Lay seem to be on the increase. According to Jim [Moral](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/ethics-and-morality), Professor of Management at Florida State, 31% of employees surveyed reported that their boss was prone to exaggerate his or her accomplishments and downplay the contributions of others. The study concluded that the narcissistic bosses created toxic environments resulting in declining productivity.

The recent economic downturn, with layoffs and financial pressures on managers to perform may have exacerbated the bullying problem. Research conducted by Wayne Hochwarter and Samantha Englehardt at Florida State University concluded that "employer-employee relations are at one of the lowest points in history," with a significant decline in basic civility.

Is bullying a reflection of a general decline in civility? In poll after poll, Americans have voiced concern over the erosion of civility. According to a poll by Weber Shandwick, 65% of Americans say the lack of civility is a major problem in the country and feel the negative tenor has worsened during the financial crisis and recession.

Pier M. Forni, author of [The Civility Solution: What To Do When People Are Rude](http://www.amazon.com/Civility-Solution-What-When-People/dp/B0041T40VW)and director of **The Civility** Initiative at Johns Hopkins University says, "In today's America, incivility is on prominent display: in the schools, where bullying is pervasive; in the workplace, where an increasing number are more stressed out by coworkers than their jobs; on the roads, where road rage maims and kills; in [politics](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/politics), where strident intolerance takes the place of earnest dialogue; and on the web, where many check their inhibitions at the digital door."

According to a 2008 study published in the **Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies**, allegiance to many old public virtues such as the Bill of Rights, the Geneva Convention and the rule of domestic and international law is now commonly mocked or dismissed as quaint by significant people in power and [persuasion](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/persuasion).

Some also suggest that there is a "blame the victim" mentality developing in the nation that somehow contends that the victims of crime, [domestic violence](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/domestic-violence), poverty, workplace conflict, and foreign civilian populations "had it coming," rationalized by the artificial justification of "toughness" or "responsibility."

So what's being done about workplace bullying?

Sutton encourages organizations to do something about it. Among the companies that keep the jerks out are **Google's** "no jerk" policy and business software company **Success Factors**, instituting a similar rule, which includes lengthy job interviews and probing questions designed to uncover brow-beating tendencies.

Robert Mueller, author of [Bullying Bosses](http://www.amazon.com/Bullying-Bosses-Survivors-Transcend-Interpersonl/dp/0976829304), and Marilyn E. Veincentotzs, author of [How Organizations Empower the Bully Boss](http://www.amazon.com/HOW-ORGANIZATIONS-EMPOWER-BULLY-BOSS/dp/1593305915/ref=pd_sim_b_3) contend that both organizations and employees need to confront bully bosses and refuse to accept their bullying behavior.

In the U.S. 20 states are now exploring legislation that would put bullying on the legal radar screen. In Canada, the provinces of Ontario, Saskatchewan and Quebec have passed legislation that addresses workplace bullying, although both countries are far behind countries in Europe and New Zealand.

One thing is for sure; the problem of workplace bullying will not go away anytime soon and may never be fully remedied until enough people call for a return to a culture of civility, and demand that governments and organizations take action.