

What Does a Workplace Bully Look Like?

For employers, for workers in general, and for workplace bullies themselves, the identification of profiles and behavior that match with the phenomenon of workplace bullying becomes difficult due to the use of the term “bully” in describing the phenomenon.

Typical bullies we meet in our formative years, at school or college, are physically bigger, intellectually incompetent, and usually choose bullying or physical violence as their first response to what they feel as personal crises. This is the stereotype that we, including employers, employees, and workplace leaders associate with the term “bully.”

However, the “workplace bully” is an entirely different beast

The little Miss forget-me-not overloading her subordinates with unrealistic targets with a charming smile and a pat on the back can be a bully, if such behavior and overloading is repetitive, recursive, and not to fend off business crises, but to demean her subordinates, or just meant to meet her own imagined benchmarks.

The suave and Mr. Charming who appears to be the best manager you can possibly have, may also be a bully if he is engaging in workplace bullying behaviors and affecting business in the long run.

In fact, according to Bully Online, the most recognized U.K. National Workplace Bullying Advice Line, many managers end up bullying employees because they cannot distinguish between leadership and bullying behaviors.

That is how the workplace can breed workplace bullies, even though a person or a manager may not have had a bullying attitude to begin with.

To respond to crises, managers engage unknowingly in bullying behavior, and when they find solutions to crises, they attribute it to the new patterns of behavior they adopted, without thinking things through. So, a workplace bully comes into existence.

Research has shown we can find some common attributes in workplace bullies “ these are:

- A workplace bully cannot distinguish between leadership and bullying behaviors
- A workplace bully is usually charming in public, though vindictive in private
- A workplace bully often likes to project himself/herself as kind, caring, compassionate and in

general a wonderful person as though actions contradict the persona

- A workplace bully would usually deny responsibilities and counterattack when asked to clarify something
- A workplace bully usually revels in controlling others and the feeling of power
- A workplace bully often tries to manipulate people through guilt
- A workplace bully behaves in an absolutely charming manner in the presence of superiors
- Workplace bullies are convincing and also compulsive liars
- They lack conscience, are amoral, though often projecting a deeply religious or moral attitude
- Workplace bullies usually appear extremely self-assured at all times to mask their insecurity

Now, many ordinary leaders and managers, who are not workplace bullies, can sometimes exhibit such behavior. However, the patterns of behavior would not be recursive and would rarely have an intended outcome of causing harm to another employee.

Five things employers can ensure to combat workplace bullying

In an article on bnet.com, Alsever J. (2008, October 20) published an effective guide for employers to handle workplace bullying by changing policy. That article, named How to handle a workplace bully mentions the following five-step process:

- Understand what constitutes bullying and recognize the patterns of action
- React to bullying quickly to establish that the company is not going to tolerate behavior against company policy
- Enforce a clear action plan to combat workplace bullying
- Create a policy to maintain a civilized workplace
- Create screening processes for bullies in recruitment processes and interviews

Employers carefully need to assess action and patterns of conduct managers employ to deal with other employees, rather than the patterns of behavior they exhibit when dealing with the employer to weed out bullies from the workplace.

However, regrettably, the common upper management reaction to patterns of workplace bullying, though surprising, is to push bullying under the rug, dismissal of the bullied person and promotion of the workplace bully. (Workplace Bullying Institute, How Bullying Happens).

So, to combat bullying effectively in the workplace, and keep retaining outstanding employees, employers need to think things over and stop this silent epidemic that affects workplaces and makes business lose their competitive edge, and best people.