

# Bullying In The Workplace: What It Looks Like And Its Impact



**Workplace bullying can have significant impacts on an employee and the entire organization if not dealt with in a timely and appropriate manner**

Workplace bullying has different names: harassment, intimidation, humiliation, and abuse, among many others. This kind of behaviour can take place at workplaces across industries and in and out of an office environment.

Bullying is a form of unwanted, aggressive, or even passive-aggressive behaviour in which someone causes another person injury or discomfort. It can also look like a misuse of power in workplace relationships in the form of repeated verbal or physical abuse or other negative social behaviours which isolate a person and cause them harm.

Unfortunately, the issue of workplace bullying persists despite more awareness and understanding of the varying types and degrees people can experience. In recent years, complaints and allegations against television personalities such as Ellen DeGeneres and Jimmy Fallon, as well as film producer and convicted sex offender Harvey Weinstein, have illustrated that no one is immune to the dangers of workplace harassment and abuse.

The 2019 movie, *The Assistant*, was inspired by the Weinstein scandal. In it, a young woman working as an assistant is faced with a toxic work environment at a film production company. The film highlights the emotional and psychological abuse, sexism, and silence surrounding workplace harassment.

Or consider this real-life case involving a Japanese car manufacturer in 1998. The company was charged with allowing a hostile work environment toward its female employees since at least 1990. The manufacturer agreed to pay \$34 million to female workers from their Illinois-based plant, as well as several more million in individual suits. Since then, the company has impressively overhauled its anti-harassment and complaint system, and now boasts a zero-tolerance policy.

Additionally, terms like “toxic masculinity” have become prevalent in sports teams across the world, illustrating a cultural shift that acknowledges and no longer tolerates harassment and harmful behaviour as workplace norms.

## **What does workplace bullying look like and where does it happen?**

Bullying is not always plain and simple. It can look like repeatedly ignoring an employee, failing to invite them to company events, not recognizing their contributions to a project, placing unrealistic expectations on them, treating employees poorly, or sending emails which are dismissive or targeting. Bullying can be subtle and silent.

These are just a few examples of workplace bullying but there are many more ways in which bullying, intimidation, and harassment take place in a work environment.

It is important to note that workplace bullying can take place in various settings including offices, retail stores, educational institutions, and even on remote job sites. The bullying may occur online, in person, or both.

Diligence is key to understanding how bullying might be impacting your workforce and is even more important when it comes to putting a stop to toxic and dangerous behaviour before it can escalate any further.

Bullying can affect an employee's performance at work, as well as in their personal life. It is the responsibility of the employer to recognize the signs and take appropriate action. Look out for signs of:

- Frustration
- Overt emotional distress
- Avoidant behaviour
- Increased sick leave or absence.

Checking in on your employees if you notice behaviour that is out of the ordinary can help them feel supported and understood, and it might encourage them to share their experiences.

## **Why do people often not come forward to report bullying?**

There are many reasons a person may not come forward to report bullying. These reasons apply to both the victim of bullying and bystanders who may have observed or been told about the incidents.

Often, employees may fear they'll lose their jobs or face other professional repercussions for reporting bullying behaviour. They may also be worried they'll become a target for more abuse.

According to recent employment surveys, employees are more likely to leave a job because of bullying rather than face their bully or confide in a superior or HR department over fears of an unknown outcome.

Organizational culture is another big reason employees don't report workplace bullying. If an organization doesn't foster a culture of openness, inclusion, and trust, a person will be far less likely to feel they have the support they need to facilitate change.

Additionally, they may be unaware of what kind of procedure or policy they need to follow to ensure their protection. Having clear guidelines within an Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) or HR policy can help alleviate some of the stress or confusion.

## What can be done?

Bullying prevention practices cannot be put into action unless bullying behaviours are identified and addressed with all employees. Management has a significant role to play in ensuring they exercise their authority to enforce certain policies and punish bullying behaviours.

Creating a workplace that champions ethical behaviour is more than a business statement, it's living your anti-bullying policies and showing your employees how seriously you take them.

This can include:

- Demonstrating ethical behaviour as well as appropriately dealing with poor behaviour quickly and effectively.
- Ensuring your policies and procedures reflect the changing health and safety and harassment legislation both provincially and federally.
- Providing training to all employees on your expectations and what constitutes bullying.
- Supporting victims of bullying by offering support services such as counselling through your organization's Employee Assistance Program, or elsewhere.

Monitor behaviour and look for the signs. Recognize where there is tension in your workplace and ensure you have policies in place to provide a safe, confidential way for employees to report bullying.

Bullying behaviour can and will escalate quickly and will affect more than one employee without speedy intervention. This can result in the loss of great employees, unexpected sick leave, poor reputation, and further allegations against the organization if not managed properly.

Understanding what bullying is, where it can be found, and how to protect your employees and the organization will give you the tools to foster a healthy work environment for all.

*The content of this article is intended to provide a general guide to the subject matter. Specialist advice should be sought about your specific circumstances.*

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