

A Cause of Failure in Addressing Workplace Bullying: Trauma and the Employee

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Abstract

Employees traumatized by workplace bullying may respond with post traumatic stress disorder symptoms. Organizational workplace bully policies are not well adapted to recognize or adequately deal with this aspect of workplace bullying. Most workplace bully policies are focused on the legality rather than the complexity of the issue or the needs of the victim. If an employee does not feel they can speak up the bullying can become traumatizing. This paper includes a case study of an employee who has experienced workplace bullying and shown signs of trauma. Based on this case, recommendations are made for organizations to address workplace bullying more adequately.

Keywords: Workplace bullying, employee, organization.

Introduction

The objective of this paper is to demonstrate how organizational process and policies dealing with workplace bullying fail to address bullying in which some victims, and sometimes the bystanders, experience trauma and exhibit symptoms of “Post-traumatic Stress Disorder” (PTSD). It also considers how policies can contribute to the problem. Trauma refers to an event of an unpleasant nature. It usually pertains to life- or personhood-threatening situations. The event can be considered less important than the person’s perception of the event as each person is impacted differently by life experiences. The effects of trauma are often clustered under the diagnosis of PTSD (Peyton, 2003). Along with general symptoms of stress, the sufferer may also experience difficulties learning new information, be it from being distracted and unfocused or feeling “triggered,” experiencing difficulty processing information or situations (Glumac, 1999).

Anxiety or panic is a frequent response from those who have experienced a person-initiated traumatic event. Another common response is for the respondent to begin to act like a perpetrator (Kramer, 1971) or a victim (Efendov, Sellbom and Bagby, 2008). Either response can have a negative effect in a work environment. Several researchers have identified a link between symptoms experienced in workplace bullying and PTSD (Leymann, & Gustafsson, 1996, Bonafons, Jehel & Coroller-Bequet, 2009, Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2004, Mikkelsen, & Einarsen, 2002, Soars, 2002, Meglich-Sespico, Patricia; Faley, Robert; Knapp, Deborah Erdos, 2007; Bond, Tuckey & Dollard, 2010). The research has looks at the reactions of individuals to workplace bullying and links it to the responses that are identified as PTSD.

Workplace bullying and other forms of workplace incivility have long-lasting effects on organizations and its employees. Impacts include organizational dysfunctionality, absenteeism and stress (McKay, Huberman Arnold, Fratzi and Thomas, 2008; Rayner, 2006; Einarsen et al. 2003, Leymann, 1996). Organizations tend to focus on the legal and investigative or educational process (Rubin & Thomlinson, 2006) of addressing workplace bullying. Less emphasis is placed on the needs of the participants. After years of research and education about workplace bullying and related policies, people still report difficulty standing up to the bullies (McKay, Huberman Arnold, Fratzi and Thomas, 2008). In part the problem stems from organizations approaching all workplace bully cases as similar in nature and thus requiring the same process.

Once a complaint of workplace bullying is made to management an informal or formal process is initiated that focuses on fact finding and trying to reconcile the two parties in order that work can continue with the least disruption (Rubin, and Thomlinson, 2006). This is in the best of situations. In some cases victims do not have the opportunity to participate in an organization-directed process because the organization does not have a policy for workplace bullying, is not effective at addressing workplace bullying despite having a policy, or because there is a lack of legislation protecting the employee. As a result, the only recourse is through expensive and divisive legal channels. As well, in some countries such as Canada, external legal recourse is unavailable to unionized employees unless the employee can prove the bullying is linked to a human rights issue (OPSEU, 2009). Even if available, legal intervention often makes it difficult for the employee to reintegrate back into the organization.

The challenge for management is that victims of workplace bullying respond in different ways to processes and policy (both formal and informal) set by organizations to deal with bullying. As well, differing interpretations of policies, different management styles, experience and differences in training can result in varying applications of a workplace bully policy (McKay, Huberman Arnold, Fratzi and Thomas, 2008). For some, the impact of workplace bullying is severe and debilitating. The process of confronting the bully, a typical part of workplace bully policies, can be a problem for the victim of workplace bullying. In addition, both bully and victim experience greater difficulty resolving issues when either or both have a past history of trauma or feel traumatized by the experience or organizational process of dealing with workplace bullying (Tehrani, 2004). The key benefit of examining bullying through the lens of trauma may be that it informs us about the potential limited success of educational initiatives and workplace policies. In particular, the presence of trauma in an employee makes resolution of bullying – where the complainant and the aggressor are brought together to discuss the event and resolve differences – most likely ineffective. Having the complainant describe how they feel and discuss events in the presence of the aggressor or knowing the aggressor will be informed about how they feel may further the trauma. It is also possible that the aggressor will take this knowledge and in a covert fashion refine their abuse against the victim in the future (Namie and Namie, 2003).

Another challenge in dealing with traumatized employees is the impact the trauma or PTSD has on the employee's effectiveness at work. Performance reviews place a high emphasis on productivity and personal interaction. Even if the employee is able to be productive, the lodging of a formal or informal complaint may lead to other employees treating the employee differently and may result in reduced effectiveness. The individual may be viewed as being disruptive to the organization by lodging a complaint of workplace bullying. Namie and Namie (2003), who completed research about what happened to workplace bully victims, found that 82 per cent of bullied employees lost their job, 38 per cent left voluntarily for self preservation and 44 per cent were expelled in a way controlled by the employer. It is probable those expelled left due to poor performance brought on by the impact of the workplace bullying and that their deteriorating performance was not connected by management or human resources to the bullying they were experiencing. The result is that the organization keeps the bully and loses an employee who may have previously been very productive (Hornstein, 1996). Organizations need to determine early in the process the severity of the situation and the impact on the employee of a process designed to address the situation. There is also a need to adapt training, especially at the management level, to address the range of victim responses.

In this paper trauma and workplace bullying is examined by using a case study. In the case, employee X is a new employee confronted with covert and overt bullying by a well established employee. Employee X reacts by withdrawing both at work and in his/her personal life. He/she stops taking care of themselves. The humiliation and confusion leads eventually to the individual fantasizing about being accidentally killed as a way of escaping the situation. The organizational policy and process available for Employee X is considered in light of the employee's response to the bully and evaluated as to its effectiveness. This paper will start by examining the link between trauma, PTSD and workplace bullying. Second, the workplace bully policies will be examined in light of PTSD brought on by workplace bullying. Next, a case example of workplace bullying in a Canadian organization that exhibits trauma symptoms in the victim is presented and examined. Recommendations will be provided for organizations to reduce the impact of workplace bullying and create more effective policies.

Indicators of Trauma

The report of feeling frozen and other indicators such as gastric distress, heart palpitations, sleeplessness, and a desire to leave the situation are but a few of the indicators of the "flight or fight response" commonly referred to as "stress," and clinically, as 'trauma response' (Gil, 2003).

Anecdotally, people seem to report that they know what they should say or do and are perplexed that they cannot seem to follow through. Some report feeling ‘frozen.’ The fight response speaks for itself. Those responding in this mode are often prone to outbursts, at home if not at work, and may respond with violence. Flight refers to the impulse or desire to get away from or avoid a situation. The “freeze response” (Haas-Cohen, Carr, 2008) can be an immediate response to danger (as in a rabbit that becomes still to allow camouflage to protect it) or it can be a response to prolonged stress, or ‘learned helplessness.’ A third more recent area of research on the “flight or fight” response, is the impact of stress and trauma on women and the “affiliation response” (Taylor, 2000). The so-called ‘primitive brain’ seeks to form or strengthen interpersonal bonds to increase chances of being protected by another individual or group.

Stress is likely to produce a disorder if the individual has little control over the traumatic event or if it was unanticipated, unpreventable, and life-threatening (Raphel, 1981). For the victim, workplace bullying is unanticipated. If the victim knew the condition of interpersonal dynamics on the job most likely would not have accepted the job. Despite efforts by the employee and procedures in place in the organization to address workplace bullying, bullying may be unpreventable due to work expectations and interpersonal dynamics. It may also be life-threatening (Bond, Tuckey & Dollard, 2010; Groebtingho & Becker, 1995). For some the impact on the employee of the bullying and the potential to lose a job in a manner that may make finding another job very difficult, can threaten the employee’s security. Extreme cases of workplace bullying such as the case of Green, formally of Deutsche Bank (Tait, 2006) in Britain, and Sulz, formally of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) (Humphrey, 2006), have resulted in large payments to the victims in recognition that the employee will likely never be able to work again due to the impact of the workplace bullying on their state of being. This indicates how traumatizing and life threatening workplace bullying can be.

Researchers argue that in some cases workplace bullying may result in PTSD. One aspect of PTSD is the repeated re-experiencing of the traumatic event through recurrent nightmares, distressing, intrusive recollections or flashbacks (Glumac, 1999). Protracted workplace bullying often involves a distressing flashback element by constantly exposing the individual to the stressor (i.e. the bully) that induce a state of trauma. For example, in 1994, Clark, an RCMP officer, successfully sued the RCMP for both negligence and intentional infliction of nervous shock. In October 1986, Clark filed a complaint of harassment against two of her supervisors after numerous negative comments and reprimands were placed in her file. Her legal settlement concluded Clark was harassed and subjected to sarcastic and sexist remarks by her male colleagues. Clark was told she was not a real woman, called a "butch" and subjected to pornographic movies that were shown in her work area. The work environment began to affect her health but her superiors failed to help her. In 1987, when her condition worsened to the point of a mental health crisis, she resigned from the RCMP. Harassment was the major cause for her resignation (Clark v. Canada, 1994). The judge concluded there is no doubt that Clark’s supervisor owed Clark a duty of care and breached that duty consistently. During a lengthy time, it was ruled that Clark’s supervisor refused to exercise his authority to end the harassment of which he was well aware and which he participated in, thus condoning that behaviour (Bernardi, 2001). In this case, like flashbacks, there is a repetitive nature to the bullying acts. Clark was unable to prevent the stressors of bullying because her supervisor participated in the bullying. The complaint process within the organization was ineffective and thus compounded the workplace bullying further traumatizing the employee.

Pervasiveness of Previous Life Trauma in a Work Population

An emotional disorder that results from trauma, such as long-term workplace bullying, is often linked to four vulnerabilities: a genetic disposition to anxiety, adverse early life experiences, maladaptive personality traits and fostering of illness behaviour within the family (McFarlane, 1985). Adverse early life experiences, such as sexual abuse, are a reality in a percentage of the working population. Timnick (1985) conducted a study of 2,627 people (both men and women). The study asked questions about childhood sexual abuse. The study found that 22 per cent reported having been sexually abused in childhood, 27 per cent of the abused were women and 16 per cent were men. In a second study of 595 men, 11 per cent of them reported sexual abuse and 17 per cent reported physical abuse (Lisak, Hopper and Song, 1996). In addition, there is a percentage of the population who have been exposed to domestic violence or war (Foster, 2001) events recognized as traumatizing. For example, recent data from an American sample (that was nationally representative) shows that each year domestic violence, a traumatizing experience, occurs in the homes of approximately 30 per cent of children living with two parents (McDonald et al., 2006).

These studies illustrate how pervasive life trauma can be among the population and hence a workplace. PTSD may be the result of an accumulation of events resulting in a crisis. The proximate cause may be either an earlier or later event. The early events can stretch back into childhood.

The research linking PTSD to workplace bullying has, with the exception of a study by Mikkelsen and Einarsen (2002), focused on the symptomatology of victims of long-term bullying. The studies do not link previous life experiences to the likelihood of being traumatized again in the workplace by bullying. A study by Leymann and Gustafsson (1996) evaluated the symptoms of 64 patients subject to workplace bullying. The diagnosis showed a severe degree of PTSD fully comparable with PTSD from war or prison camp experiences. Mikkelsen and Einarsen (2002) completed a study with 118 subjects assessing the prevalence and severity of PTSD analogue symptomatology, the link between stressful life events and PTSD. The study evaluated the PTSD analogue symptomatology and an evaluation of workplace bullying victims' assumptions of themselves.

One conclusion of their study was that "exposure to other distressing life events may increase victims' vulnerability when facing bullying at work" (Mikkelsen and Einarsen, 2002:107). Mattheisen and Einarsen (2004) surveyed 102 individuals that had experienced workplace bullying. Of those who responded, 57 per cent had experienced distress and symptoms of PTSD. The study also found the level of distress and PTSD was higher in those who were still being subject to the bullying versus those where the bullying had stopped more than a year ago. A recent study by Bonafons, Jehel and Coroller-Bequet (2009) looking at 22 court cases involving harassment in France concluded a psychiatric expert opinion in cases of harassment, to check whether clinical signs of PTSD can be found and linked with the harassment of bullying, would greatly facilitate matters for victims of mental harassment in the workplace.

Trauma in the workplace can be viewed as an interactive process between events occurring in the workplace and an employee's personal history. A trauma experienced in infancy or early-childhood, has a long-standing effect on a person's nervous system, making the individual more vulnerable to any subsequent trauma (Kozłowska and Hanney, 2001). Recent advances in imaging such as magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) (Haas-Cohen, Carr, 2008) have shed light on what occurs in the brain during and after traumatic incidents. It suggests that the idea of "Just get over it," is useless. A study completed by Szyf and Turecki (Shimo, 2007) identified that stress experienced at a young age can alter the DNA of an individual. In their study, the gene regulating stress was less active in eight men who had experienced childhood abuse – physical, sexual or mental, or a combination of the three. All eight had committed suicide in their mid thirties. The study showed that childhood abuse changed the molecular structure of the brain, altering how the individual responded to stress as an adult. Given the prevalence in a work population of past abuse and resultant trauma, one can conclude that some individuals with past life trauma may manage the stress of workplace bullying less effectively than others.

It should be noted that one does not have to have a history of past trauma to be traumatized by a current situation. Those who do have a trauma history may be more sensitive or susceptible. It is likely that some individuals will be traumatized for the first time by workplace bullying while others will react to workplace bullying trauma with links to previous life traumas reacting in part due to the past experience as much as the current experience.

Reaction by Organizations to Traumatized Employees

Having a trauma response is a reaction that all humans experience at one time or another. How they experience this, respond to it, and heal are where the differences lie. The lens of trauma can have a positive impact on addressing the perpetrator, especially if one views him/her as potentially having been a victim at some point in a "cycle of violence." There is research indicating that a history of child abuse is a predisposing factor in many who abuse others (Lisak, Hopper & Song, 1996; Watkins & Bentovim, 1992). From this perspective, the potential perpetrator's actions in his/her mind is seen as self-protection, standing up for oneself or normal (that's how it's done). To encourage them to change their behaviour without addressing their fear is likely only to create fear or resistance. However, what might be contributing to organizations' lack of success in dealing with the most extreme or persistent cases of bullying may be aspects of trauma and symptoms of PTSD. Workplace bully policies include a first step: informal discussions between the claimant and the person causing the behaviour. In mild cases and unintentional acts the informal process may be very effective. However, for those traumatized by the experience, an informal discussion with the aggressor may trigger a trauma response in the victim by subjecting the individual to the stress of being with the individual yet again. The difficulty with the informal process is it may involve subjective judgment by management.

In most cases managers are not trained in identifying signs of trauma. It is also possible that the victim is unaware of the options available to them and how they should respond. They may be unaware of what workplace bullying is, the link to trauma and how it can affect them and their performance. Organizations, engaging in an investigation or mediation, create an environment of uncertainty and sometimes suspicion around the victim(s) and alleged bully. As well, mediation or an investigation may take an extended length of time to complete, further harming the victim or the alleged bully through the lack of resolution. There is also the issue of perceived personalities and misdiagnosing. According to lawyers Rubin and Thomlinson (2006:26), “well-intentioned managers” can cause more harm than good. Not only does the manager have previously formulated opinions about the employees but also “managers may not be able to recognize the types of behaviour that need a more formal approach” versus those that do not. Workplace bullying may be perceived as just a personality conflict or a case of poor communication skills that further exacerbates the problem (Rubin and Thomlinson, 2006).

In the case of employees who are traumatized and suffering from PTSD due to workplace bullying, another complication occurs. The flight response, the impulse or desire to get away from or avoid a situation, may mean the victim is not forthcoming about what they are experiencing. One of the hallmark features of PTSD is flashbacks. According to Glumac (1999: 339), individuals experiencing flashbacks may respond by “Persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma and numbing of general responsiveness as indicated by:

- (1) Efforts to avoid thoughts, feelings, or conversations associated with the trauma
- (2) Efforts to avoid activities, places, or people that arouse recollections of the trauma
- (3) Inability to recall an important aspect of the trauma
- (4) Marked diminished interest or participation in significant activities
- (5) Feelings of detachment or estrangement from others
- (6) Restricted range of affect
- (7) Sense of foreshortened future (e.g. does not expect to have a career)”

As a result of these responses, the manager may not be fully informed about the incidents by the victim and may be only informed there is a problem when the employees productivity diminishes or when a bystander lets management know about the incidents. As the manager may be perceived by the victim to be part of the problem by being complicit (possibly due to ignorance of the situation) the flight response may be very strong when discussing bullying with the manager. In addition there is an ever present concern that lodging a complaint may make the employee look bad contributing to the concern of losing their job. Rubin and Thomlinson (2006) also note that if a manager pursues an informal approach and makes the wrong decision the process has to start over. This can result in lost trust and hostility towards the investigation by the participants and in a severe case of workplace bullying a continuation of the stressor creating the trauma.

The following is a case detailing an individual’s experience with workplace bullying. While workplace bullying has been linked to PTSD there are still questions as to why bullying triggers a traumatic response (Bonafons, Jehel & Coroller-Bequet, 2009). This case provides some insight as to why harassment can be traumatic. It confirms the findings of Mikkelsen and Enarstein (2002) that a sense of incompetence is a contributing factor. After the case is outlined, its application to trauma and organizational responses to workplace bullying will be discussed. The details of the person and case are changed so the people involved remain confidential. This case is transcribed directly from an interview and are the words of the employee.

Case Study: Employee X

Within a week of starting the job Person Y started harassing me. She had it out for me. She would visit my office and ask... “What are you doing?” in a very accusatory fashion. She was monitoring me. I got used to her regularly (what I called) “stalking” me. She sent me emails asking where I was and what I was doing. She was just a colleague not my boss but some of my work went to her so she had a power over me. She questioned my decisions in front of others of all rank and when others could hear. She was skilled at appeasing our boss while attacking me. I had five years of experience in the field. I knew what I was doing and why I was doing it. However, she regularly capitalized on my ignorance about process at the organization to make me feel inadequate. If I made a mistake she was all over it. My previous work environment had more decentralized decision making so I had to learn new protocol. Differences of opinion at my old place of employment were handled through dialogue and relationships, not confrontation and questioning of ability. I am normally fairly confident and do not let people openly attack me...but this was not always done in the open.

I received many unpleasant emails from Person Y regarding my actions and work. I was so overwhelmed with the job transition that I hoped by ignoring this person she would just go away. My learning curve was so dramatic that I believed fighting back would just aggravate the situation and leave me more vulnerable. I did not trust anyone in the organization due to the presence of Person Y. I started to question everything about the organization I joined given that Person Y freely and openly operated in such a fashion.

Shortly after my arrival in the new job my wife was diagnosed with a chronic health condition that demanded my time and attention. I became less focused on my job. Person Y, as if sensing my weakness, increased the abusive emails and comments. By my second month in the new job I felt a terrible loss of confidence and started questioning my job choice and career. I started pulling inward and dreading everything about the job. One day I sat at my desk after work and just stared out the window. I did that for easily an hour, feeling waves of anxiety rush through my body. My normal response of fighting back and healthy anger disappeared because I never anticipated the attacks – they always came when I least expected it. I started to be forgetful. To this day I do not remember as much as I should about that time in my life. My normal enjoyment of life quickly disappeared. I avoided friends, family other than my wife and definitely avoided those at work. I argued unnecessarily with those close to me. Everything from sleeping to eating became an effort. I had many physical stress-related problems. I did the minimum I had to at work. I felt that at any time the truth of my inadequacy (as viewed by Person Y) would be discovered. I started to adopt her view of me. I noticed by the third month that other employees were selecting me out and questioning my decision. I think those who dislike weakness sensed my condition and challenged me. Perhaps my lack of focus, sleep and steep learning curve contributed to the problem, but the greatest problem was my state of being.

I spoke to no one at work about Person Y. While I was aware of the complaint process, I did not even consider it as I was new and as yet an unproven employee. I also knew I could not survive such a process mentally or emotionally. I could not face documenting the events and even went so far as to delete the terrible emails I received from Person Y as they were too hurtful to deal with. The thought of discussing what was happening to me and confronting Person Y or sharing my feelings as was required by the company policy would have taken me to a place from which I may not have had the strength to return. I would have quit rather than do that. Person Y by my estimation was not to be trusted under any circumstance. I started thinking how much better it would be if I died in a car accident. I stopped caring for myself. I was wearing dumpy clothing and resorting to cutting my own hair because I could not face the humility of having my hair cut in a public place. I started to forget critical details. I avoided Person Y as much as I could. I would hide in Home Depot (a box store for home building materials) during the evening buying items to do repairs on my house trying to escape thoughts of my job and Person Y. I was trapped. Unable to resolve my work situation and unable to leave. I have a specific skill so job searching is based on available jobs. Staying in a job less than a year would have made a job search next to impossible. It is a small industry. Everyone knows each other.

Finally, after almost a year, I found a new job. It was an empowering moment. I only learned much later that many people had been similarly impacted by Person Y. I always wondered what made her so insecure she had to destroy those in her path. She skillfully picked on those without the company capital or power to fight back. To me, the workplace bullying company policy supported Person Y, not those she set upon. Person Y had all the company contacts, the power and the knowledge to make a complaint by someone like me, an unproven employee, to further her cause and put my ability in doubt. If I had made a complaint I would have endured unbelievable pain and suffering and I believe the outcome – my leaving – would have been the same. Why go through the public humiliation?

Case Analysis

In this case of workplace bullying the employee recognizes that the knowledge difference between themselves and Person Y acts as a power differential. The company policy of sharing one's concerns with a manager and then with the aggressor stops the employee from lodging a complaint. Instead, the employee suffers in silence. Employee X appears to exhibit signs of trauma: withdrawal at work, socially and at home, having difficulty remembering facts and thinking in terms of a foreshortened future (the car accident). The fact that Employee X feels unable to leave or escape appears to magnify the problem. Initially Employee X makes an effort to fight back, but when he realizes the complaint process and that his lack of knowledge about company details and process is stacked against him, he withdraws.

Person Y appears to be a serial bully, repeatedly bullying new or vulnerable employees. It is in the best interest of the organization to address this problem. The workplace bully policy is not facilitating solving this problem. The organization is losing employees without knowing why.

This case is situated in Ontario, Canada. In June 2010 the Ontario government revised the Occupational Health and Safety Act to include workplace harassment also known as bullying. In the revised act workplace harassment is defined as “engaging in a course of vexatious comment or conduct against a worker in a workplace that is known or ought reasonably to be known to be unwelcome” (Ontario Ministry of Labour, 2010). The revised act requires measures and procedures for workers to report incidents of harassment and a defined investigation process. The organization is also now required to provide employees with information and instructions on the workplace policy (Ontario Ministry of Labour, 2010). While this new act creates responsibility for an organization to be proactive in the area of harassment it does not change the fact that some employees will be able to operate undetected and unreported. In this case the workplace bullying occurred quickly and disabled the employee before they were able to establish a network or an understanding of who to trust within the organization. If the employee lodged a complaint it would still place them in the position of proving to the employer what was happening. Being new to the organization still places this employee in the uncomfortable position of being an unknown employee. If the new employee chose to speak up the established employee may be able to make a very good case in defense of their actions placing doubt on the new employee. Also, given the situation, it is unlikely the new employee would lodge a complaint.

Organizational Responses

Understanding that people may be traumatized by workplace bullying can inform initiatives taken by an organization to remedy the situation. It leads to a different approach of dealing with workplace bullying. The following are actions an organization can take to recognize this aspect of workplace bullying and to create a more responsive organization. See Appendix 1 for a depiction of the standard organizational response to workplace bullying and Appendix 2 for the more enhanced approach we recommend. The following is a description of the components of the enhanced workplace bullying organizational approach.

1. Policy Building and Awareness - Effective Policies/Procedures for Workplace Bullying

In order to avoid prolonged workplace bullying that can lead to trauma, organizations need to be proactive and establish policies and procedures that all employees are aware of in creating and regularly revise or update. In some jurisdictions it is required by law that organizations have established and posted workplace harassment or bully policies. A good policy can assist employees in knowing what steps to take in the case of inappropriate behaviour at work and what behaviour is expected of employees (Rubin & Thomlinson, 2006). It also should clearly identify acceptable and unacceptable behaviours in the organization. A policy identifies who a complainant should approach to discuss inappropriate workplace behaviour and the steps involved in filing a complaint. The policy should include the option of discussing the inappropriate behaviour with one’s manager, a person in human resources or a third person outside the organization. In all three cases this support person should be educated in the areas of aggression, workplace bullying conflict and resolution and trauma. The policy should include the option to avoid a direct informal discussion (face to face without the complaint being in writing) with the perpetrator. For this policy to be effective it requires an organizational environment that embraces and promotes worker psychological health and safety (Bond, Tuckey & Dollard, 2010; Dollard & Kang, 2007) where organizational leadership participates in developing and encouraging a healthy constructive work environment.

2. Education

Education about topics relevant to workplace bullying and communication is a second step. MacKinnon and Michels (1971) refer to the ‘psychologically unsophisticated’ patient, meaning that those who have not had education about or been encouraged to reflect on themselves, are unlikely to benefit from interventions without first being educated. Education in the context of working place bullying and trauma would include definitions, antecedents of bullying and its effects (including trauma), legal facts and examining the company policy. By educating employees about symptoms such as strong fear responses, anger, withdrawal, depression, avoidance, forgetfulness, low self-esteem and crying, it may help validate victims and encourage them to speak up. Speaking up - naming the problem - is the first step (much like Alcoholics Anonymous) in addressing the issue.

3. Behaviour Linked to Evaluation

An organization that is serious about addressing inappropriate behaviours will build behaviour expectations into employee evaluations.

For example, creating a Behavioural Observation Scale (Casco, 1991) around civility and employee dynamics as part of employee evaluation at all levels will create measurable expectations. The scale should specify behaviours the organization wants to reinforce such as treating others with respect and dignity and encouraging speaking up when this does not occur (Hornstein, 2003). Without linking behaviour to performance it will be much more difficult for the organization to penalize employees who ignore the workplace bully policy and reward those that do. This approach also promotes bystanders to speak up and managers to confront inappropriate behaviours.

4. Interactive Training

Cognitive behavioural therapists see ‘skills-building’ as critical to helping an individual make changes (Mullen, 2009). When an employee faces workplace bullying they may not be prepared, and, as a result the opportunity to confront someone behaving inappropriately may pass, granting more power to the aggressor. Interactive training gives employees the ‘tools’ to address their situation earlier and more effectively (Beck, 1995). This approach includes role playing to help the participants vocalize and clarify their position in the working environment when confronted with an aggressor. Each session should include individuals trained to deal with employee issues in workplace bullying and trauma.

5. Enhanced Awareness

An organization needs to encourage enhanced awareness about the nature of interactions in the organization. This is going beyond understanding what workplace bullying is to being aware of employee interactions. This will help employees be aware when another’s behaviour is inappropriate. If employees have enhanced awareness they can more quickly address a problem that arises. As well, having the additional awareness may sensitize potential supporters or manager to a) be more observant of a co-worker or employee, b) feel empowered to ask more pointed questions than “Howzit goin?” c) enable HR or those in similar helping roles to respond to a complainant in a more productive way as the intervention will occur earlier. The supporters may help an individual who is processing feelings of fear/reluctance to engage in the initial steps of a complaint rather than waiting until the problem behaviours have escalated.

6. Disassociating Withdrawal from Weakness

Organizations need to reduce the tendency to view those who are unable to confront the bully as somehow weak. Empowering a victim with choices is essential to giving them back control. An employee may decide confronting or sharing their feelings with a potential bully or bullies would escalate the impact on themselves. In addition they may not trust the other individual(s) with information about their feelings. A policy that requires confrontation and reporting ignores the impact of such an approach on the victim. In some cases this approach re-victimizes, making the aggressor more powerful. This can lead to the victim being further traumatized. If an employee has experienced trauma previously, the impact of the bullying and organizational response can be even more harmful. Many of society’s most highly respected workers, such as those working in the police force, the military, religious institutes, doctors, nurses and paramedics, suffer from trauma either directly or through assisting trauma victims (Singer, 2008; Huddleston, Stephens & Paton, 2007; Fontana, Schwartz, Spoonster; Rosenheck, 1997). Avoidance and detachment, recognized responses to trauma, may be adopted by the employee in dealing with the bullying as feelings of powerlessness from the bullying and follow up process trigger a self survival response. Withdrawal, expressed through avoidance and detachment are natural survival responses to trauma (Glumac, 1999) that may need time to overcome.

In addition, in some situations with some individuals, it may be a disadvantage to confront the bully. For example, a bully may have a very low level of empathy (McCormick & Burch, 2005) or may see the victim as impeding their career path. The aggressor may agree in a face-to face discussion, especially with a manager present, to discuss and address unwanted behaviours but after the discussion select other ways to harm or further their agenda. They might describe the complainant as sensitive and intentionally or unintentionally inform others of their assessment. As a result, it is important to let the recipient determine if they want to share their feelings with the aggressor. In some situations, the recipient may decide sharing their feelings will only increase their level of distress and potentially open themselves up to further aggression.

7. Helping Managers Identify Correct Process

Providing management with education about applying a workplace bully policy avoids mistakes. Managers need to be able to identify which cases require a formal process and which can go through an informal process. The nature of the workplace bullying influences the approach that should be taken.

Managers should consider if the bullying is covert or overt, the way the inappropriate behaviour is expressed (e.g. through email or verbal exchange), the style of the aggressor (e.g. uses anger or facts to intimidate), the length of time the activity has been occurring and the severity and impact of the acts on the victim. Only those well-versed in workplace investigation should investigate to ensure confidentiality, correct process and prior treatment of employees. Most businesses do not have employees who are trained therapists or lawyers and able to correctly investigate a potential case of workplace bullying. Organizations may find that an interdisciplinary team is an effective strategy. If those in support positions are sufficiently trained, they will be able to facilitate appropriate intervention which will avoid making matters worse. Management's role is to determine the correct process for the employee but not independently, rather with the input of the affected employee..

8. Third Party Support System

Given the sense of vulnerability an individual feels when subject to workplace bullying, a third party might be very helpful in directing and assisting the victim to addressing the issue. The third party could be an employee assistance program with support workers who are knowledgeable and experienced in the area of workplace bullying. These support workers would also be fully knowledgeable about the organizational process and options available to victims.

9. The Bystander

Management and human resources must recognize that there may be more than the victim(s) impacted in a workplace bullying. The organization in training and designing employee support needs to accommodate the bystander (Colaroso, 2002) in workplace bullying cases. Bystander, may provide additional insight or evidence to help an organization address workplace bullying. Supportive bystanders may further a management initiative to create an environment of employee care. Bystanders often do little to help the victim. This may be out of concern for their own safety as bystanders may believe the bully could turn on them if they speak up. If a bully is well entrenched and powerful in an organization, there may be several bystanders afraid to speak up. Ways to voice concerns and trained support should be provided to bystanders. As well, bystanders who have experienced previous workplace bullying or trauma in their life, may feel helpless to intervene or identify with the bully as a means to protect themselves (Kramer, 1971). They may be re-traumatized when they witness or participate in workplace aggression.

10. Worker Self-care

Opportunities for worker self-care, including appropriate psychological processing of incidents and extended therapy can help employees overcome feelings of helplessness. Processing of the incidents can be aided by a document that defines workplace bullying, helps an employee track events and assists in evaluating its impact. In many cases an employee is overwhelmed by the events and actions. As a result, they do not accurately document the events making the process more difficult when a complaint is lodged. If the employee is traumatized by the experience or has experienced trauma previously the tendency towards avoidance and detachment may discourage documentation. Providing a support document to guide an employee through the documentation process may encourage employees to keep records. Employees should have easy and confidential access to the document in hard copy and via the company's webpage. See Appendix 3 for an example of such a document.

Some employees may want to discuss a conflict at work with someone outside the organization before an investigation is launched and to assist in addressing inappropriate behaviour by others in their organization. Providing employees with expert assistance (e.g. extended therapy coverage tailored to issues of workplace bullying behaviour and trauma) for this purpose may help these employees to be more focused and directed about dealing with the behaviours they are experiencing. Techniques such as Traumatic Incident Reduction, a safe and structured method for reviewing the contents of a traumatic event, can be offered to the victim (and to a bystander if necessary) to help reduce the negative effects of trauma (Nelson & Nelson, 2009) and help the employee reintegrate into the work environment.

Conclusion

This paper has considered the impact of bullying on the individual who experiences it as traumatic or who has ongoing or previous trauma in their life for which the bullying magnifies the trauma experience. The weakness of current policies and lack of management training is likely contributing to the trauma employees experience when subject to protracted and extreme bullying. Current policies tend to promote the victim confronting the bully in order to engender organizational assistance. Such an approach may further the agenda of the aggressor or contribute to the traumatizing of the victim.

This paper argues that organizations need to build an organizational environment of respect where appropriate interpersonal behaviour is rewarded and there is a consciousness among employees about the range of acceptable work behaviours. Employees who are subject to bullying should be educated on bullying and trauma and provided with options in dealing with the situation in an effort to empower the employee.

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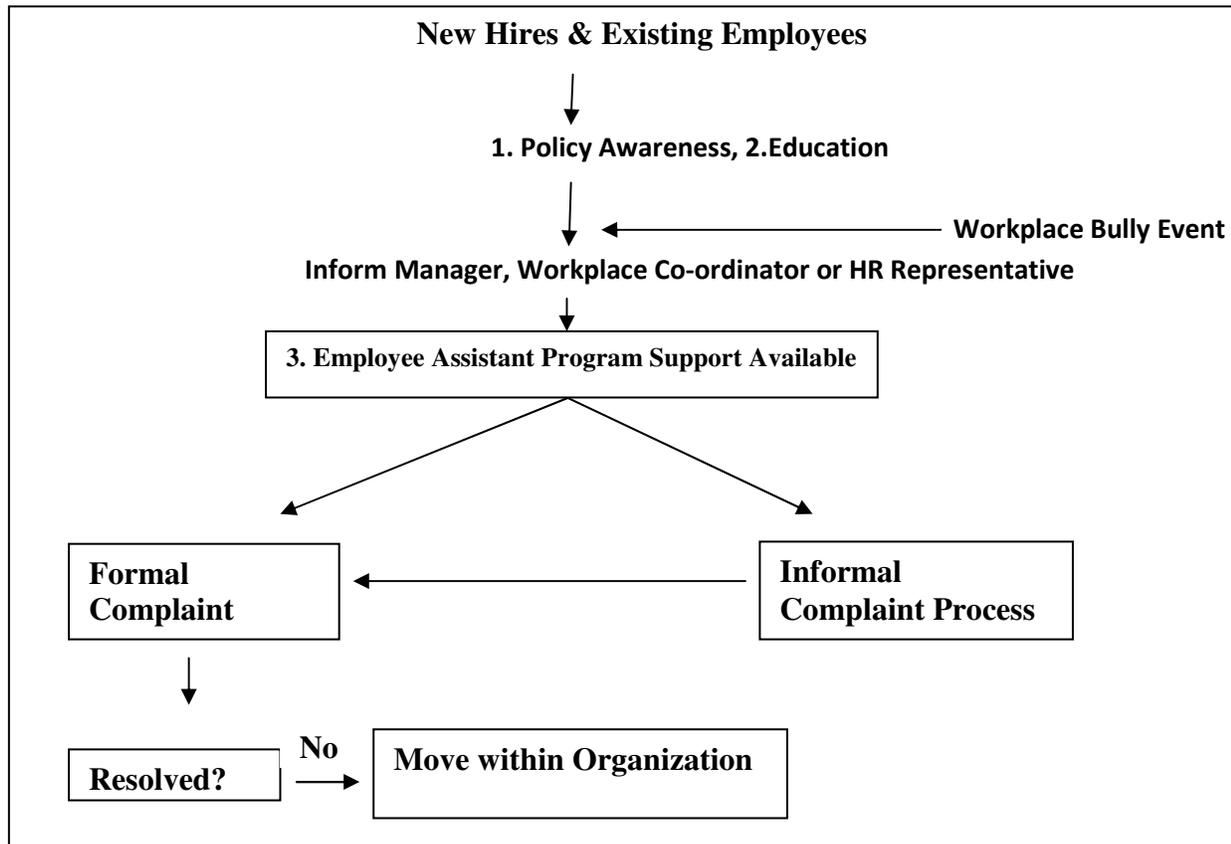
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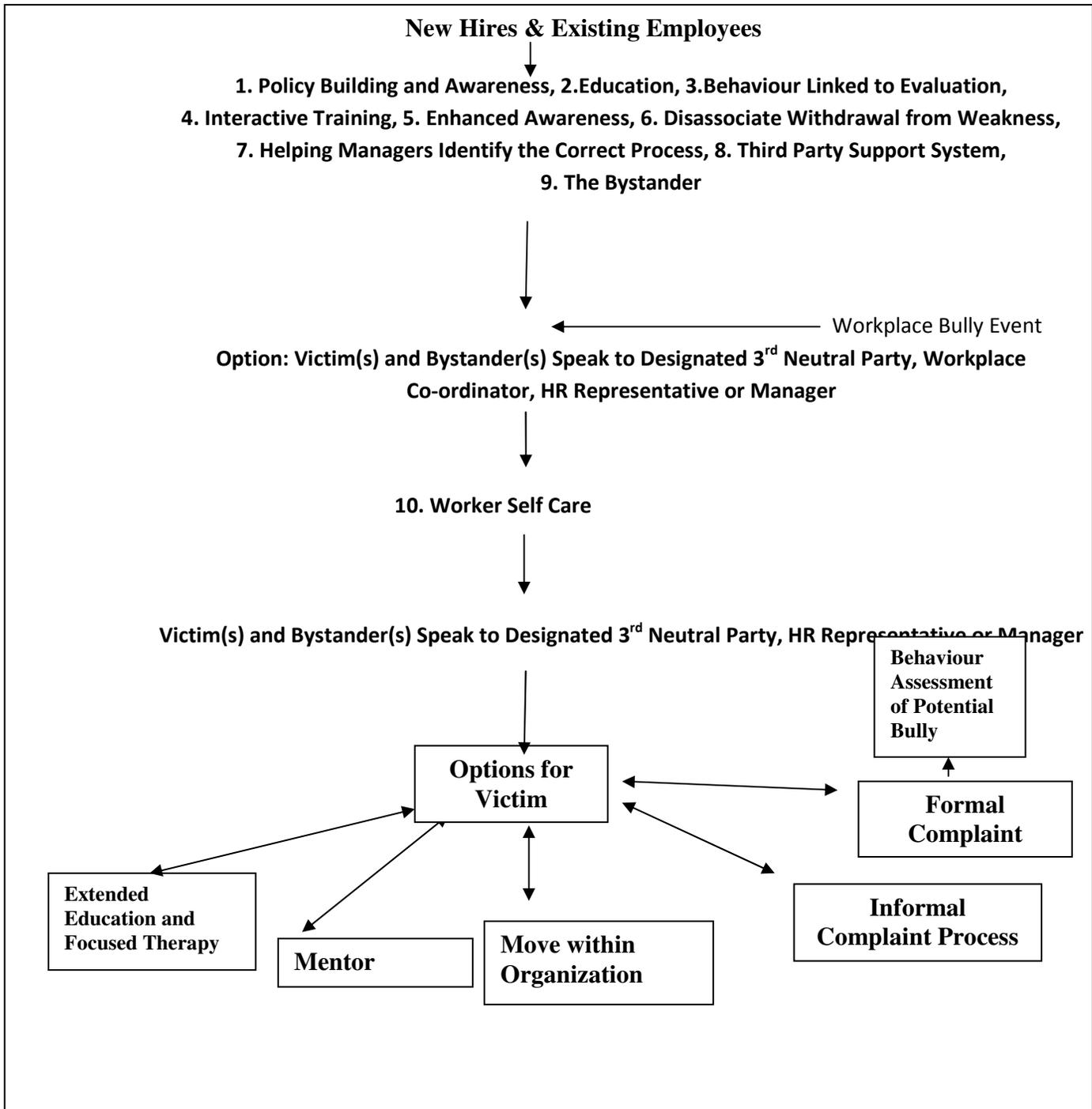
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Appendix 1

Standard Workplace Bully Organizational Approach



Appendix 2 Enhanced Workplace Bully Organizational Approach



Appendix 3

Documenting Inappropriate Behaviour at Work

The following document is provided as a tool for employees in XYZ organization to help if you are experiencing inappropriate workplace behaviour. This document is designed to provide information and to help an employee keep track of events and responses. An employee should keep this document on a home computer for confidentiality reasons.

Section A: Range of Personal Experiences over the Past Year

Listed below are behaviours considered to be bullying. Please indicate (X) which behaviours you have experienced at work in the last year by checking the appropriate columns that describe the relationship between you and the person who engaged in the behaviour. Check all that apply.

	Inappropriate Behaviours	Yes, by colleague	Yes, by a person I report to (in)directly	Yes, by a person who reports to me (in)directly
1	Gossip or rumours spread about you			
2	Not taking your concerns seriously			
3	Ignoring your contributions or legitimate requests			
4	Unwarranted and unprofessional remarks			
5	Being punished for your trivial errors			
6	Abusive telephone messages or calls			
7	Abusive or offensive emails, letters or memos			
8	Teasing or name calling (e.g. about race or ethnicity)			
9	Isolating, or ostracizing you			
10	Bypassing hierarchy to initiate a complaint			
11	Questioning your decision(s) excessively or aggressively			
12	Challenging your authority			
13	Intentionally with-holding necessary information/equipment			
14	Unwarranted criticism			
15	Removing responsibility without prior notice or reason			
16	Alienating you from colleagues			
17	Shouting, swearing or sarcasm directed at you			
18	Setting you up to fail or blocking promotion			
19	Racist or sexist comments or jokes			
20	Given an unreasonable workload or deadline			
21	Excessive monitoring			
22	Excluded from relevant meetings			
23	Excluded from social events			
24	Taking credit for your work or ideas			
25	Being the subject of eye rolling, sighs, and/or dirty looks			
26	Being lied to			
27	Having your property maliciously or inappropriately moved, damaged or stolen			
28	Incivility and rudeness			
29	Being treated unfairly or differently			
30	Comments about your appearance, age, gender, sexual orientation, a disability or personal life beliefs (e.g. religion)			

B. Personal Diary of Events

If you discuss your experiences with a person inside the organization or an approved third party outside the organization it is important that you have your experiences documented so you can discuss the events in an organized approach. The following is a table designed to help you track your experiences.

Date	Event	Impact on me (see below)	Location and witnesses

C. Impact

What was the effect of the identified behaviours on your work?

Little Effect Distracting Disruptive
 1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5

D. Reactions

Listed below are common reactions to being bullied. When exposed at work to the behaviours outlined in QA I have/had feelings of... Check all that apply.

	Reaction	Check
1	Anger	
2	Fear	
3	Shame	
4	Stress	
5	Frustration	
6	Exhaustion	
7	Anxiety	
8	Depression	
9	Humiliation	
10	Powerlessness	
11	Irritability	
12	Confusion	
13	Low self-esteem	
14	Sadness	
15	Loneliness	
16	Being defeated or demoralization	
17	Wanting to retaliate	
18	Rebelliousness	
19	Motivated to do better or work harder	
20	Motivated to prove the person wrong	
21	Avoidance of thoughts or feelings associated with being bullied	
22	Avoidance of activities, places or people	
23	Forgetful – e.g. forget aspects associated with the bullying	
24	Diminished interest or participation in significant activities	
25	Feeling detached from others at work or at home	
26	A concern about the future – e.g. about career or relationships	
27	Other - explain	