



COPING WITH A BULLYING BOSS: EMPLOYEE STRATEGIES AND ORGANIZATIONAL INTERVENTIONS

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Abstract: Workplace bullying by supervisors has significant negative effects on employees' mental health, job satisfaction, and organizational productivity. This paper explores the types of bullying behaviors exhibited by supervisors, such as verbal abuse, micro-managing, and exclusion, and highlights the power dynamics that enable such behavior. The paper also examines the personal coping strategies employees use to manage bullying, including direct confrontation, seeking peer support, and documenting incidents. In addition, it emphasizes the importance of organizational interventions, such as anti-bullying policies, HR and management training, mediation programs, and whistleblower protections. By addressing both employee strategies and organizational responsibilities, this paper provides a comprehensive overview of how workplace bullying by supervisors can be effectively managed and prevented.

Keywords: Workplace bullying, supervisor bullying, employee coping strategies, organizational interventions, anti-bullying policies

1. Introduction

Workplace bullying is a pervasive issue in many industries, with supervisors or bosses often acting as the primary perpetrators. Bullying by supervisors typically includes behaviors such as verbal abuse, intimidation, manipulation, exclusion, and unfair treatment that create a hostile work environment (Einarsen et al., 2011). These behaviors may manifest in the form of public humiliation, unreasonable demands, or deliberately undermining an employee's work. Such actions can have a profound impact on employees' mental health, job satisfaction, and overall productivity (Namie, 2014).

The prevalence of bullying by supervisors varies across industries but is recognized as a significant concern in sectors such as healthcare, education, and corporate settings. A study by Lutgen-Sandvik (2007) revealed that nearly 37% of workers experience bullying in the workplace, with supervisors being the most common source of this behavior. The consequences of such bullying are far-reaching,

often leading to increased absenteeism, higher turnover rates, and reduced organizational performance (Hoel & Cooper, 2000). As organizations become more aware of the detrimental effects of bullying, there is growing pressure to implement strategies and policies aimed at preventing and addressing this issue.

The primary aim of this paper is to explore the strategies that employees use to cope with bullying from a supervisor. By understanding how individuals manage the stress and trauma associated with workplace bullying, this paper seeks to provide insights into the personal mechanisms that employees employ to protect their mental and emotional well-being. Additionally, the paper will examine the role of organizational interventions in addressing supervisor bullying. It will explore how clear anti-bullying policies, HR involvement, and whistleblower protections can help mitigate the negative impact of bullying on employees and foster a healthier work environment.

Through this dual focus on employee coping strategies and organizational responses, the paper will provide a comprehensive understanding of how workplace bullying by supervisors can be managed and ultimately prevented.

Workplace bullying by supervisors has a detrimental impact on employee well-being and organizational performance. However, a combination of personal coping strategies—such as direct confrontation, seeking support, and stress management—coupled with robust organizational interventions—such as anti-bullying policies and HR training—can help mitigate the harm and foster a healthier work environment.

2. Understanding Workplace Bullying by Supervisors

2.1 Types of Supervisor Bullying

Bullying by supervisors can manifest in various forms, each of which undermines the well-being and performance of employees. The most common form of supervisor bullying is verbal abuse, which includes yelling, derogatory remarks, and belittling employees in front of their peers (Namie, 2014). Such behavior often leads to humiliation and public criticism, further damaging an employee's confidence and morale.

Another form of bullying involves micro-managing, where supervisors excessively control and monitor every detail of an employee's work, stifling autonomy and creating an oppressive work environment (Hoel & Cooper, 2000). Bullying supervisors may also engage in withholding critical information needed for tasks, or deliberately sabotaging work to make the employee seem incompetent. Additionally, some supervisors exclude employees from team activities or decision-making processes, marginalizing them within the team and fostering a sense of isolation (Einarsen et al., 2011).

2.2 Power Dynamics in Workplace Bullying

Power imbalances are central to understanding why and how bullying occurs in workplace settings. Supervisors hold significant power over employees through their ability to make decisions that directly impact an individual's career, such as performance reviews, promotions, and assignments (Zapf & Gross, 2001). This power dynamic can enable bullying, as employees may feel unable to challenge their superior or report the behavior due to fear of retaliation, job loss, or career stagnation.

The organizational culture also plays a critical role in enabling or tolerating bullying behavior. In workplaces where aggressive management styles or unchecked hierarchies prevail, bullying may be ignored or even implicitly encouraged (Branch, Ramsay, & Barker, 2013). When organizations fail to address power imbalances or establish clear policies against bullying, supervisors may feel emboldened to continue their abusive behavior without fear of consequence.

2.3 Impact on Employees

The effects of workplace bullying by supervisors are profound and far-reaching. Employees who are victims of bullying often experience a range of psychological and emotional impacts, including anxiety, depression, and burnout (Nielsen et al., 2012). The constant stress of being bullied can also lead to physical symptoms such as headaches, sleep disturbances, and gastrointestinal issues, further exacerbating the negative effects on an individual's health.

In terms of job performance, bullying leads to decreased productivity and motivation. Employees may struggle to focus on their tasks, make more errors, and become disengaged from their work. This drop in performance can damage an employee's career development, as they may miss out on promotions or other opportunities for advancement due to the negative perception created by the bullying supervisor (Hoel & Cooper, 2000).

Over time, workplace bullying can have long-term consequences for employees, including career derailment and loss of self-esteem. Many individuals subjected to sustained bullying may leave their jobs to escape the toxic environment, but the psychological scars of the abuse often linger, impacting their confidence and professional identity in future roles (Namie, 2014).

3. Employee Coping Strategies

3.1 Direct Confrontation

One approach that some employees take to deal with a bullying supervisor is direct confrontation. This involves standing up to the bullying boss and clearly setting boundaries. Employees may assert their rights, communicate the impact of the bullying behavior, and request that it stop. However, while direct confrontation can

sometimes lead to a resolution, it also carries significant risks. There is the potential for retaliation from the boss, including further abuse, exclusion, or even demotion (Einarsen et al., 2011). In some cases, confrontation can escalate the situation, leading to even more aggressive behavior from the supervisor (Namie, 2014). Employees considering this option must weigh the potential outcomes and prepare for the possibility that the situation may worsen before it improves.

3.2 Seeking Support from Colleagues

Another common strategy is seeking support from colleagues. Building alliances with coworkers can provide both emotional and practical support in dealing with a bullying boss. Colleagues can offer advice, share their own experiences, and even act as witnesses if formal complaints are made (Hoel & Cooper, 2000). Having a peer network or an informal support system within the workplace helps employees feel less isolated and more empowered to confront the bullying behavior.

Moreover, peer support can reduce the emotional toll of bullying by providing validation and a safe space for employees to discuss their experiences. However, this strategy is not without its challenges, as coworkers may fear retaliation themselves or be reluctant to get involved in confrontations with management (Branch et al., 2013).

3.3 Documenting the Abuse

One of the most effective ways for employees to protect themselves is by documenting the abuse. Keeping records of incidents, emails, and interactions with the bullying supervisor provides a clear, factual basis for any future complaints or legal action (Namie, 2014). This documentation can serve as evidence if the employee chooses to report the bullying to human resources or pursue legal recourse.

Detailed documentation includes recording the date, time, and nature of each incident, as well as any witnesses present. By systematically gathering evidence, employees increase their chances of having their complaints taken seriously by organizational channels and legal bodies (Einarsen et al., 2011).

3.4 Formal Complaints and Reporting

Filing formal complaints through HR or organizational grievance procedures is another option for employees facing bullying. Most organizations have mechanisms in place to handle workplace conflicts, including policies that explicitly address bullying. Employees can file reports with HR, detailing their experiences and requesting an investigation (Hoel & Cooper, 2000).

However, many employees fear retaliation from their bullying boss, particularly if HR does not guarantee confidentiality or if the company culture tends to side with management (Branch et al., 2013). In cases where formal channels fail to



address the issue adequately, employees may feel disillusioned or believe that their only option is to leave the organization.

3.5 Personal Coping Mechanisms

In addition to formal strategies, employees often adopt personal coping mechanisms to manage the stress of bullying. Techniques such as meditation, exercise, and therapy can help reduce anxiety and promote mental resilience (Nielsen et al., 2012). Engaging in regular stress management activities allows employees to maintain their emotional well-being and mitigate the psychological impact of bullying.

Seeking mental health support through counseling or therapy is also a valuable tool for coping with workplace bullying. By focusing on self-care and building resilience, employees can prevent long-term damage to their mental health, even if the bullying persists (Nielsen et al., 2012).

3.6 Considering Job Change

In some cases, the best option for an employee is to consider leaving the job altogether. Weighing the pros and cons of staying in a toxic environment versus finding a healthier work setting can be difficult, especially if the employee is otherwise satisfied with their role or feels financially dependent on the job (Namie, 2014).

However, continuing to work under a bullying supervisor can take a severe emotional toll, leading to long-term stress, anxiety, and even depression. For some employees, resigning may be the best way to preserve their mental and emotional well-being, despite the potential economic or career-related sacrifices (Nielsen et al., 2012).

4. Organizational Interventions

4.1 Anti-Bullying Policies

The implementation of clear anti-bullying policies is essential for preventing and addressing workplace bullying. Effective policies should define what constitutes bullying, outline the reporting procedures, and specify the consequences for bullying behavior (Salin, 2008). These policies help create a zero-tolerance culture where bullying is not ignored or minimized.

Examples of successful anti-bullying policies include companies that enforce mandatory training for all employees and establish strict protocols for investigating complaints. Organizations that actively enforce these policies and provide clear channels for grievances tend to see fewer instances of workplace bullying (Hutchinson et al., 2010). Enforcement is critical; policies alone are insufficient if they are not applied fairly and consistently across the organization.



4.2 HR and Management Training

Training is a vital component of preventing workplace bullying. HR personnel and managers must be trained to recognize the signs of bullying, understand how to intervene, and take appropriate action (Fox & Stallworth, 2009). Additionally, leadership training should emphasize the importance of empathy and communication skills, which are essential for building a positive work environment and reducing the likelihood of bullying behaviors (Einarsen et al., 2011).

Programs that teach conflict resolution, active listening, and emotional intelligence can help managers deal with workplace tension proactively, preventing minor conflicts from escalating into bullying situations. When HR personnel are well-trained, they are more capable of handling complaints in a manner that is fair, transparent, and sensitive to the needs of the employee.

4.3 Mediation and Conflict Resolution Programs

Mediation programs offer a structured method for resolving disputes between employees and supervisors before they escalate into formal complaints or legal action. By involving a neutral third party, such as a trained mediator or conflict resolution specialist, these programs help facilitate open communication and provide a safe space for both parties to voice their concerns (Hoel & Giga, 2006). Mediation can often lead to mutually agreeable solutions, reducing the overall tension in the workplace.

Mediation programs are particularly effective in preventing bullying from spiraling out of control, as they encourage early intervention. These programs are most successful when the organization supports a culture of dialogue and fairness, allowing both employees and supervisors to feel heard and respected during the resolution process (Tehrani, 2012).

4.4 Whistleblower Protection

To encourage reporting, organizations must ensure whistleblower protection for employees who come forward about bullying. Without these protections, employees may fear retaliation or even job loss, which can prevent them from reporting abusive behavior. Legal frameworks in some countries offer protections for employees who report misconduct, but companies must also implement internal policies that clearly state that retaliation is forbidden (Near & Miceli, 2008).

Supporting whistleblowers involves more than simply protecting their jobs; it requires fostering a culture where reporting is seen as a constructive action that benefits the organization. Companies that offer strong whistleblower protections can create a safer, more transparent work environment where employees feel confident in reporting inappropriate behavior without fear of adverse consequences (Dworkin & Baucus, 1998).



4.5 Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs)

Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) are an important resource for employees who are dealing with the emotional and psychological toll of workplace bullying. EAPs offer confidential counseling services, mental health support, and referrals to specialists who can help employees cope with stress, anxiety, and trauma resulting from bullying (Nielsen et al., 2012). These programs not only benefit the individual employees but also promote overall well-being and resilience within the organization.

In addition to traditional counseling, EAPs may include wellness programs that address both physical and mental health. By providing a holistic approach to employee wellness, these programs help mitigate the long-term impacts of workplace bullying and foster a healthier, more productive work environment (Cooper, 2013).

5. Case Studies and Real-World Examples

5.1 Case Study 1: Successful Resolution through HR Intervention

In one case, an employee working in a corporate setting experienced bullying from a direct supervisor, including verbal abuse and public criticism. The employee documented the incidents over several months and then filed a formal complaint with the HR department. HR responded promptly by launching an investigation, during which the employee's documentation played a crucial role in substantiating the claims.

As part of the resolution process, HR arranged a mediation session between the employee and the supervisor, facilitated by a neutral third party. The mediation allowed both parties to express their concerns and reach an agreement on improved communication and behavior going forward. HR followed up regularly to ensure the situation did not escalate again, and the bullying ceased. The success of this intervention highlights the importance of clear documentation and a responsive HR team in resolving workplace conflicts (Hoel & Giga, 2006).

5.2 Case Study 2: Employee Exit Due to Bullying

In a contrasting example, an employee working in the healthcare industry faced continuous bullying from a supervisor, including exclusion from team meetings, withholding of critical information, and manipulation of tasks to undermine performance. Despite multiple attempts to confront the supervisor and seeking support from colleagues, the bullying persisted. The employee eventually filed a formal complaint with HR, but the organization's lack of a strong anti-bullying policy and insufficient HR intervention led to no substantial changes.



After months of enduring the toxic environment, the employee chose to resign from the position. The exit was emotionally and professionally costly, as the employee felt forced to leave a job they otherwise enjoyed. This case underscores the consequences of inadequate organizational support and highlights the emotional toll that bullying can have on an individual when no effective interventions are in place (Namie, 2014).

5.3 Case Study 3: Organizational Overhaul of Anti-Bullying Practices

A large technology company faced a widespread issue of bullying, particularly at the managerial level. After numerous complaints were filed over several years, the company recognized the need to overhaul its workplace culture. The organization implemented a comprehensive anti-bullying policy that included clear definitions of unacceptable behavior, an anonymous reporting system, and strict disciplinary measures for violators.

In addition to policy changes, the company launched mandatory training programs for all employees, focusing on recognizing bullying behaviors, bystander intervention, and conflict resolution. HR also established a whistleblower protection program to ensure employees felt safe reporting bullying without fear of retaliation. Over time, these initiatives transformed the workplace, significantly reducing bullying incidents and fostering a more supportive and respectful organizational culture (Salin, 2008).

6. Recommendations for Employees and Organizations

6.1 Recommendations for Employees

Document the bullying behavior: Keep detailed records of incidents, including dates, times, and witnesses. This documentation will be vital if formal complaints are made.

Seek support: Build a support network with trusted colleagues and seek external counseling if necessary to maintain mental and emotional well-being.

Report the behavior: Use the company's HR or grievance procedures to formally report the bullying. If the organization has an anti-bullying policy, reference it in the complaint.

Consider external help: If internal avenues fail, employees may seek legal advice or file complaints with labor boards or other governing bodies to protect their rights.

6.2 Recommendations for Organizations



Develop and enforce anti-bullying policies: Clearly outline unacceptable behavior and ensure that employees are aware of how to report bullying incidents. Policies must be consistently enforced to be effective.

Provide training for HR and management: Train HR personnel and managers on recognizing bullying, handling complaints, and fostering a positive work environment.

Offer mediation and conflict resolution: Introduce mediation programs where employees can resolve conflicts with supervisors in a structured, neutral setting.

Ensure whistleblower protection: Implement policies that protect employees from retaliation when reporting bullying, and ensure anonymity when possible.

Support employees through EAPs: Offer Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) to provide mental health and counseling services for employees dealing with bullying and other workplace stressors.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Summary of Key Points

Supervisor bullying has a profoundly negative impact on both employees and organizations. It leads to emotional, psychological, and professional harm, such as anxiety, depression, burnout, reduced productivity, and long-term career derailment. Addressing supervisor bullying is crucial to maintaining a healthy and productive workplace. Employees use a variety of coping strategies, from direct confrontation and seeking peer support to documenting abuse and, in extreme cases, leaving the job. However, personal strategies alone are not enough. Organizational interventions, such as clear anti-bullying policies, HR training, mediation programs, whistleblower protection, and Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), are essential to effectively address and prevent workplace bullying.

7.2 Final Thoughts

For organizations to combat workplace bullying effectively, they must prioritize a culture of respect, support, and zero tolerance for bullying. Proactive efforts to create policies and enforce them consistently, while also offering ongoing training and conflict resolution programs, are necessary to create a positive work environment. Furthermore, organizations should protect employees who come forward with complaints and ensure that bullying behavior is addressed swiftly and fairly.

At the same time, employees should be encouraged to take proactive steps for their well-being. This includes building support networks, seeking help from HR, and using stress management techniques to safeguard their mental health. By combining



organizational efforts with empowered, informed employees, workplaces can move toward environments free of bullying, where respect and productivity flourish.

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