

BULLYING AND MOBBING AT WORK – FACT SHEET

BASED ON COMMENTS BY GRAHAM LOWE, 2013 CALGARY LABOUR ARBITRATION & POLICY CONFERENCE

- Bullying is generalized psychological harassment, which means that it is broader in scope and impact than gender or ethnic/racially-based harassment. Over the past decade, there has been a growing recognition by employers, legislators, tribunals and courts of the negative personal and organizational impacts extracted by workplace bullies. Bullying presents a serious workplace health and safety risk and therefore is a liability for employers. Consequently, there is now recognition that employers have a duty to maintain not only a physically safe workplace, but also a psychologically safe work environment.
- The term “mobbing” refers to psychological aggression or harassment by a group rather than a single person.
- In 2004, Quebec was the first North American jurisdiction to provide legal protection against the psychological harassment of employees. This legislation is based on what is now a widely accepted definition of psychological harassment: “Any vexatious behaviour in the form of repeated and hostile or unwanted conduct, verbal comments, actions or gestures that affect an employee's dignity or psychological integrity and result in a harmful work environment for the employee. A single serious incidence of such behaviour that has a lasting harmful effect on an employee may also constitute psychological harassment.”
- The Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) defines a psychologically safe workplace as “One that allows no significant injury to employee mental health in negligent, reckless or intentional ways...and in which every reasonable effort is made to protect the mental health of employees.” Workplaces are psychologically unsafe when harassment, discrimination, verbal abuse, unfairness and disrespect are permitted or when employees lack reasonable influence over daily work. Useful practical tools for creating a psychologically healthy and safe work environment (i.e., in which bullying is not tolerated) include:
 - ✓ The new voluntary National Standard for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace http://shop.csa.ca/en/canada/occupational-health-and-safety-management/canca-z1003-13bnq-9700-8032013/inv/z10032013/?utm_source=redirect&utm_medium=vanity&utm_content=folder&utm_campaign=z1003 (introduced in 2013 by the MHCC and the Canadian Standards Association)
 - ✓ Great West Life Centre for Mental Health in the Workplace, *Workplace Strategies for Mental Health in the Workplace* <http://www.workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com/index.asp?l1=144>
 - ✓ Guarding Minds @ Work, *A Workplace Guide to Psychological Health and Safety* <http://www.guardingmindsatwork.ca/info>

- Bullying is an extreme form of disrespectful behaviour. Civility and respect are crucial prerequisites of a psychologically safe and healthy work environment. Civility and respect are essential for employee mental wellbeing in the workplace. When civility and respect are present in a work environment, managers and employees are respectful and considerate toward each other as well as towards customers/clients and the public. They consistently show esteem, care, consideration and overall respect for the dignity of the other person.
- Experts agree that organizations must not protect bullies who otherwise perform their job. Some would argue that the only effective solution to systematic bullying is to rid the workplace of the bully. Putting a bully back into the same work environment after rehabilitative training, counseling or other interventions may lead to a repeat of the bullying behaviour.
- There is extensive evidence that exposure to workplace bullying is associated with a range of stress symptoms and psychological complaints, life dissatisfaction, depressive mood, burnout, anxiety, aggression, doctor-diagnosed depression, psychosomatic complaints and musculoskeletal health complaints. Job dissatisfaction, disengagement, absenteeism, presenteeism and quitting also are associated with exposure to bullying. Furthermore, some studies link exposure to bullying to increased risk of cardiovascular disease, particularly among individuals who already have health risks. Exposure to bullying does not have to be long-term and repeated for these consequences to manifest themselves. Exposure to one bullying episode in the previous 6 months can trigger some of the above reactions. Bullying not only affects those directly involved, but also affects bystanders who observe bullying, as they too experience higher levels of stress.
- A recent study suggests that bullying can be harder on victims than gender or racially-based harassment. What is particularly insidious about bullying is that victims blame themselves because the motives are not readily apparent. By contrast, in cases involving harassment or discrimination based on race or gender, the victims would attribute the harassment to the perpetrator's prejudice. As a result of self-blame, the psychological consequences of bullying can be intensified and it is more difficult for victims to come forward with complaints and seek redress.
- Studies indicate that the above negative employee outcomes impose substantial costs on employers that can be directly measured in terms of increased health benefits costs for prescription drugs and medical services, lost productivity due to absenteeism and presenteeism (coming to work when ill or injured and not being fully able to perform one's job duties), long-term disability, and costs associated with replacing workers who quit. Victims and observers of bullying also can experience reduced job satisfaction, work energy and engagement, which undermines their job performance. Given the interpersonal tensions, conflicts and toxic work environment generated by bullies, team performance also can be negatively affected.
- Increased public awareness about the harmful effects bullying means we are seeing more of it. While workplace bullying is not a new problem, it is difficult to claim that it is worse today than 10 or 20 years ago because we lack trend data.

- Furthermore, we also lack reliable national data on the incidence of workplace bullying or mobbing. However, several large surveys help to illuminate the scope of the problem:
 - ✓ The 2011 Public Service Employee Survey (PSES), which includes all federal government employees, found that 29% of about 200,000 survey respondents experienced harassment in the previous 2 years. The 2008 PSES reported a similar incidence (28%). Harassment is defined in the survey as “any objectionable act, comment or display that demeans, belittles, or causes personal humiliation or embarrassment, and any act of intimidation or threat.” Among those reporting harassment, 67% experienced it from a supervisor or manager, 63% from a coworker, 14% from employees working for them, 23% from members of the public, and 8% from individuals over whom they have custodial responsibility. All this despite the fact that two-thirds of all 2011 PSES respondents agreed that their department or agency “works hard to create a workplace that prevents harassment.” <http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/pses-saff/2011/results-resultats/bq-pq/00/org-eng.aspx#s8>
 - ✓ The 2005 National Survey on the Work and Health of Nurses asked approximately 19,000 nurses about emotional abuse and exposure to hostility and conflict. Emotional abuse in the past 12 months from a nurse co-worker was reported by 12% of respondents and 8% reported emotional abuse by physicians during the same period. In contrast, 44% of nurses are exposed to hostility and conflict from the people they work with – much higher than the Canadian workforce incidence of 28% (as reported by the 2002 Canadian Community Health Survey). <https://secure.cihi.ca/estore/productSeries.htm?pc=PCC342>
 - ✓ The National Research Corporation Canada’s Employee Experience Survey, conducted between 2011 and 2013 in 60 Ontario hospitals, found that 26% of the 41,000 survey respondents (includes managers and employees, but not physicians) had experienced verbal abuse from a manager, co-worker or other staff member and 38% from patients or members of the public in the previous 12 months. Only 34% reported that their employer takes effective action if staff are bullied, harassed or abused either by coworkers or patients/members of the public.
 - ✓ A 2010 survey of about 800 human resources managers by the Human Resources Professionals Association and *Canadian HR Reporter* found that 73% spend considerable time dealing with problems caused by bad managers. Over one-third said their employer tolerates bad behaviour from problem managers who get results. Among the most common problems were treating employees disrespectfully (cited by 62%) and bullying or intimidation (cited by 57%). Bad managers may lack training in people skills, but training won’t be useful for those whose values and attitudes are inconsistent with the organization. <http://www.hrreporter.com/articleview/8783-problem-managers-a-big-problem-survey>