

Workplace Bullies - by Anne Howard

On Tuesday, April 6, 1999 Pierre Lebrun walked into work at the OC Transpo in Ottawa, shot and killed 4 co-workers and then himself.

Pierre Lebrun did not have a history of violent behavior, but he did have a history of being bullied and ridiculed by his colleagues. Despite Pierre Lebrun's extreme reaction and a growth of violent reactions in organizations there remains a low level of understanding of workplace bullying.

It can be very difficult to relate the high profile media stories about workplace homicides to our everyday lives. Believing that our workplaces are not like those is an easy thing to do. The reality is that many workplaces share one of the features of those news stories – **workplace bullies**.

Who Are They?

- Half of workplace bullies are men and half are women
- Women bully other women 80% of the time
- Men bully women 70% of the time
- 1 in 6 workers is affected by bullying – more than are affected by racial or sexual harassment
- Supervisors are the bullies more than 80% of the time (See: 2003 Report on Abusive Workplaces: www.bullybusters.org)

What is Workplace Bullying?

It is the repeated mistreatment of a person by another; behaviour that intimidates, demeans or humiliates someone. Bullying is a form of psychological violence.

Bullying includes the following types of actions, usually occurring in some combination of a few to many:

- Constant excessive, unwarranted, destructive criticism
- Removing responsibilities
- Assigning trivial tasks as "punishment"
- Refusing to delegate due to lack of trust or wanting to monopolize the benefits
- Persistently picking on people in front of others
- Blocking promotions, opportunities for training, leaves, transfers
- Sabotaging the work of others
- Creating an environment where success is impossible by overloading a person with work and/or establishing impossible time frames
- Withholding information or resources required to do the work
- Preventing a person from attending meetings necessary to their work
- Undermining the person's credibility through derogatory comments and any of the actions noted above
- Belittling a person's opinions and ideas
- Deliberately intimidating the person through shouting, name calling, implied or overt threats
- Physical abuse
- Excluding a person resulting in their social isolation
- Spreading rumours, gossip or lies
- Tampering with a person's personal belongings or work equipment
- Invading a person's privacy (snooping, spying, stalking)

The Typical Workplace Bully

That confident, achievement oriented, competitive, hardworking, person who has high standards for themselves and for others and who gets things done might be a bully. When that apparent confidence is a well-developed cover for feelings of inadequacy and the individual's power is misused, bullying is a result.

Bullies seek to assert themselves as superior to others by diminishing the people around them. Bullies tend not to understand the impact of their behaviour on others.





The Typical Workplace Victim

Falling into the stereotype trap can happen here resulting in the belief that the victim will be the meek, easily intimidated, insecure and quiet employee, which in reality is not usually the case.

People who refuse to be subservient, are technically competent, like to work cooperatively, are non-confrontational and have strong principles of justice and fairness, are well liked, capable employees are very likely to be a target for a bully.

If a person with some or all of those characteristics also happens to have suffered from a previous trauma and is therefore vulnerable, they are even more likely to be bullied.

The relationship between the bully and the victim is often dismissed as a personality conflict.

Consequences of Workplace Bullying?

Pierre Lebrun’s reaction was fairly uncommon though it is becoming less so. The common consequences suffered by individuals and organizations are:

Organizational Consequences	Individual Consequences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased absenteeism • Reduced productivity • Decreasing capabilities of bullied employees • Employee Turnover • Reduced morale overall • Increased health and safety problems • Damaged organizational reputation • The development of a toxic workplace • Liability for the wrongful acts of employees* 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased absenteeism • Decreased confidence and an inability to concentrate with resultant loss of competence in their work which leads to reduced productivity • Increased risk for substance abuse, stress related physical problems, depression • Loss of their job

*See "A Risky Enterprise: Liability of employers for the wrongful acts of their employees" at www.emond-harnden.com/publications

In Canada there is no specific health and safety legislation that deals with workplace bullying, though some provinces have workplace violence legislation that does include bullying.

Preventing Bullying

- Develop and introduce a comprehensive Respectful Workplace Policy. Ensure that the implementation of the policy includes a training component.
- Enforce the Respectful Workplace Policy
- Treat complaints seriously and with the same approaches used to address other discriminatory or violent actions.
- Train employees in delegation, supervisory, providing and obtaining constructive feedback and conflict resolution. Establish realistic expectations.
- Critically assess personality conflicts and look very carefully at declining performance and increased absenteeism in previously productive employees.
- Treat any form of bullying as an organizational problem that is not tolerated and must be resolved, not as a personal problem between two people.

Interested in Learning More?

The following websites provide some good information:

- www.bullybusters.org
- www.bestlaw.ca see the article "Bullying in the Workplace," L. M. Bernardi.
- www.workplaceviolence.ca see the article An Anatomy of Workplace Violence in Canada
- www.emond-harnden.com see articles, "Workplace Violence: A challenge for employees" and "Bullying at work: another form of workplace violence"
- www.ilo.org see "Safework: An Introduction to Violence at Work"