

Chapter 45

The Misappropriation of Organizational Power and Control: Managerial Bullying in the Workplace

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ABSTRACT

Workplace bullying has been the focus of much interest and research over the last forty years. This concern reflects the growing awareness of the organizational costs associated with all forms of bullying. Of particular importance is what has been called abusive supervision, which constitutes the most prevalent and destructive form of negative workplace conduct. This chapter understands abusive supervision to be a prototypical example of workplace bullying, rather than a narrower and more restricted expression of it. The chapter reviews workplace bullying, focuses on abusive managerial behavior, and understands such behavior as a misappropriation of legitimate organizational processes and dynamics for own personal ends. Bullying behavior violates the norms of workplace ethics, organizational justice, and the agency role of management. The chapter considers initiatives through which managerial bullying might be identified, remediated, and reduced.

INTRODUCTION

There are multiple definitions and manifestations of workplace bullying, but all center on inappropriate and unwarranted aggression. Aggression is best understood as behavior directed toward another person with the intent to cause harm, although the perpetrator might be unaware of the nature of the harm, its extent, or the personal identity of the target (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Barling, Dupré, & Kelloway, 2009). Workplace bullying occurs when “an employee’s well-being is harmed by an act of aggression perpetrated by one or more members of the organization” (Aquino & Thau, 2009, p. 718). In this context,

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well-being relates to “a sense of belonging, a feeling that one is a worthy individual, believing that one has the ability to predict and to cognitively control one’s environment, and being able to trust others” (p. 718).

Workplace bullying is expressed in different ways and is considered to include a cluster of separate theoretical constructs; however, it has been found that the “meta-analytic research that compares these constructs against a series of consequences has found that, by and large, there is little to no difference in the magnitude of consequences from these different constructs” (Hershcovis, Reich, & Niven, 2015, p. 4). Thus, while workplace bullying can take multiple expressions that might appear distinct, the overall impact and damage produced is uniformly negative.

One of these separate constructs is abusive supervision, defined as the “subordinates’ perceptions of the extent to which their supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact” (Tepper, 2000, p. 178). Subsequently, it was claimed that “abusive supervision excludes reference to the perpetrator’s objectives, a feature that sets it apart from the construct definitions for victimization, bullying, supervisor aggression, and supervisor undermining” (Tepper, 2007, p. 284). However, in this chapter, it is argued that all of workplace bullying – including abusive supervision – is indeed predicated on the perpetrator’s objectives, which may be deeply personal, psychologically generated, and frequently not consciously recognized by those involved, including the perpetrator. Throughout this chapter, abusive supervision is regarded not only as the most prevalent expression of workplace bullying, but also as the prototypical form of workplace aggression.

From such a perspective, workplace bullying – certainly as expressed through victimization, supervisor aggression, supervisor undermining, and abusive supervision – presents something of an oxymoron. On the one hand, workplace indicates an organizational setting within which participants might be expected to conform to the collective norms of organizational behavior, culture, and citizenship. On the other hand, bullying is an individual and a personal behavior involving manipulation, exploitation, and distortion of organizational power-differentials in ways designed to disempower, marginalize, and distress the targeted individual (Einarsen, 2000; Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011; Hershcovis et al., 2015). Therefore, workplace bullying represents a dysfunctional clash between organizational and personal objectives; a fundamental conflict between organizational citizenship and individual behavior; and, more crucially, an attempt by the perpetrator, either consciously or unconsciously initiated, to subvert organizational power and authority for his or her self-centered benefit.

Workplace bullying does not simply provide emotional and psychic benefit for the perpetrator; it results in very real costs for the organization within which it occurs. The direct organizational costs include: (a) decreased organizational performance and engagement connected to lowered job satisfaction, life satisfaction, and organizational commitment; (b) increased stress-related absenteeism, sick-days claimed, and rising employee medical and therapeutic intervention costs; (c) increased workforce turnover and intention-to-quit statistics; (d) increased retaliatory and counter-productive behaviors, ranging from deliberate absenteeism and work delays to theft and sabotage; and (e) the very real exposure to criminal liability, litigation, claims for compensation, and potential reputational damage (Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Hershcovis & Barling, 2010; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Restubog, Scott, & Zagenczyk, 2011; Schat & Frone, 2011; Thau & Mitchell, 2010; Yamada, 2013).

These costs may be difficult to quantify, but current estimates show they are significant. For example, it has been estimated that the annual cost of workplace bullying in the United Kingdom is about GBP 13.75 billion (Giga, Hoel, & Lewis, 2008). In the United States, a wide range of cost estimates have been

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