



5 Minute Safety Talk

Workplace Bullying and Harassment

WHAT IS WORKPLACE BULLYING?

Most of us have experienced or witnessed some form of bullying, even if it was back in middle school or on the playground. We might think this goes away with age, but bullying remains a serious issue affecting workplaces all across the country. According to a 2017 survey by the Workplace Bullying Institute, 19% of Americans are bullied in the workplace and another 19% witness it.*

Bullying and harassment in the workplace can include a wide variety of actions, gestures and words. In general, bullying and harassment involve some sort of unwanted behavior directed toward an individual or group in the workplace, occurring once or over a period of time.

BULLYING VS. HARASSMENT

Traditionally, harassment in the workplace has referred to inappropriate words, actions and conduct made on the basis of race, religion, age or other protected categories. Federal law prohibits such harassment, but there are not always protections against 'bullying' behavior. Bullying can take many more forms, including verbal, physical and even psychological taunts, with the ultimate difference being that it is not based on a protected status. Still, if the behavior is unwanted, it is unwelcome in the workplace.

Examples of bullying behavior include:

- Mocking, intimidating or humiliating an employee, publicly or privately
- Purposefully excluding employees or co-workers from meetings or work events
- Withholding crucial information or time so that an employee cannot successfully accomplish a task and is subsequently reprimanded
- Knowingly taking credit for the work of another employee or co-worker
- Unfairly criticizing an employee

According to the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, harassment becomes unlawful when dealing with the inappropriate conduct becomes a condition of continued employment or the behaviors are severe or pervasive enough to create a work environment which any reasonable person would consider hostile, abusive or intimidating. Unlawful harassing behavior can include offensive jokes, physical assaults or intimidation made on the basis of race, color, religion, sex (including pregnancy), national origin, age (40 or older), disability or genetic information**.

Bullying and harassment in the workplace can affect morale and job performance, particularly if the target does not feel he or she can do anything about it.

SAFETY RISKS

In addition to affecting employee morale, workplace bullying can create safety hazards. According to a recent study led by a Portland State University researcher, bosses and supervisors who engage in bullying behaviors can create less safe work environments. If a worker is made to feel inessential, he or she may be more likely to take shortcuts, overlook safety steps and become complacent, creating unnecessary risks***.

Bullying and harassment can also create psychological and physical health risks for the employee being targeted. From stress and anxiety to physical issues like high blood pressure and fatigue, the effects can be serious. In situations with prolonged bullying, employees may end up changing departments or leaving the company, leaving the bully in place to continue these inappropriate behaviors.

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RESPONDING TO WORKPLACE BULLYING AND HARASSMENT

The targets of bullying and harassment in the workplace often feel powerless to respond, but it is important to address these behaviors and protect employees. If your workplace has an existing policy for reporting these behaviors, follow the proper steps. If not, bring the behavior to the attention of your supervisor, human resources representative or both, depending on who is involved. According to the Workplace Bullying Institute, the majority of workplace bullies are bosses, so workers must have an option to report inappropriate conduct to someone besides their direct supervisor.

If you experience bullying from a boss or co-worker, do your best to remain calm and avoid keeping it bottled up. Never wait to report it and talk to someone. Everyone has the right to a workplace free of hostility and bullying behavior.

Make sure to do your part to create a bullying-free workplace:

- Treat all co-workers with respect
- Be inclusive of co-workers when setting up meetings and work events
- Offer positive feedback and support instead of negative criticism
- Avoid spreading gossip, rumors and misinformation about co-workers and work issues

*Workplace Bullying Institute

**U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission

***Portland State University

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