

Bullying in the Workplace: The Psychological Causes and Effects of Bullying in the Workplace

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ABSTRACT

Workplace bullying is one of the widespread problems that face employees recently. The aim of this paper is to internalize the problem widely and examining its causes and effect to create a perception of the problem from all angles. From this point, the topic of this paper has been chosen. Basically, it has been reached that there are different types of bullying, such as verbal, physical, sexual, and cyber bullying in the workplace. As each type differs in its characteristics as well as the way it affects the victims of bullying. Besides, the causes of this phenomenon can be summarized as low-self-esteem, feelings of inferiority, and the pressure of the work for the bullies. Workplace bullying has many negative effects on the victims of bullying from many angles such as psychological, physical, and socioeconomic angles. To reduce workplace bullying problems, several coping strategies have been found like establishing policies that contain anti-bullying acts in the workplace and training the employees to raise awareness toward bullying.

Key words: Bullying, coping strategies, fair work act, workplace bullying

INTRODUCTION

Bullying has become one of the common issues that face people in daily life in educational, institutional, and workplace fields. Killoren argued that bullying became more widespread than many people expect.^[1] The number of victims of the bullying is increasing remarkably all around the world. A survey done in the UK for 2000 employees shows that 23% of the workforce were bullied, 25% felt left in the work, and 12% of employees were struggling to find a friend in the workforce.^[2] Workplace bullying institute has done a study regarding bullying in the workplace, it concluded that 1:3 employees have been part of bullying as a victim or witness suffering from collateral harms.^[3] About 57% of bullying cases in the workplace were bullying from the supervisors of the employees.^[1] In addition, it has been concluded that 90% of American workers have experienced bullying, while three-quarters of the bullies were male, and 60% of them were practicing bullying toward female workers in the workplace.^[4]

These statistics are not simple and reflect how important is to search for a solution to this problem as soon as possible to reduce the collateral damage of employees facing bullying. Thus, it became essential to understand the causes and effects of bullying in the workplace. However, before going deeper, it is better to start with definitions of the basic terms that will be used in paper frequently; to draw a wide overview of this issue. First, bullying is defined as the irrational use of power to attack others individually or collectively, either verbally, physically, socially, or psychologically, which leads to damages for the bullying victims.^[5] Second, workplace bullying, according to Fair Work Act (2009), workplace occurs when a person or a group of people act irrationally frequently toward any worker or a group in the workplace in a way that causes damage physically or psychologically.^[6] From this perspective, it is important to note that acts such as harassment, social exclusion, and offending may labeled as bullying only if it is occurring repeatedly from the same individual or group. Besides, the purpose of this paper basically is to provide a wide and comprehensive overview of bullying in the workplace, as well as providing the

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possible solutions to reduce the negative effects of bullying phenomena in the workplace.

TYPES OF BULLYING IN THE WORKPLACE

There are many types of bullying that may occur in the workplace, the most important and common types, such as verbal, physical, sexual, and cyber bullying will be discussed briefly. First of all, verbal bullying refers to any form of spoken abuse that includes mockery, gossip, or humiliation.^[7] It is also important to note that some bullies use verbal bullying as a means of fun or joke intentionally to hide that they are offending a person; however, if it happens more than once then it counts as bullying.^[8]

Second, physical bullying which is physical assault, either by hitting or kicking, which may lead to physical harm as well as psychological trauma, manager hitting the employee because of a mistake can be an example.^[8] In addition, pushing and grabbing should be taken seriously if they are happened repeatedly as they are considered assault.^[9]

Third, sexual bullying or sexual harassment can be used as synonyms as both include using sexual phrases or jokes and continuously spreading sexual rumors, either orally or electronically, in the workplace of a specific person.^[10] Sexual harassment decreases the productivity of the work significantly as it affects the employee and some might be absent from the work as a result of being harassed by someone in the workplace.^[11] According to DOYLE (2020) any act or word that contains sexual connotation, that affects the employee or make him/her not feeling comfortable is count as sexual harassment.^[12]

Finally, cyber bullying is bullying through online platforms or social media by repeatedly spreading a rumor about one of the employees from the manager or employee or irony about something related to the employee.^[8] It is essential to note that cyber bullying includes most types of bullying as the bully may offend others verbally without being spoken ascending messages in social media, or sexually by the use of technology for sending inappropriate contents.

CAUSES OF BULLYING IN THE WORKPLACE

The reasons for being bullied can be summarized in several points, as will be mentioned below. First, undoubtedly, the best person in the workplace is the target of the bully as he/she has certain qualities that make him distinguished at work or loved by everyone unlike the bully.^[13] Besides, bullies always struggle with their low self-esteem as they feel threatened by colleges who are better in performance in the

workplace which leads them to bully others.^[14] It has been also emphasized that skilled workers are the target as they receive attention from others frequently for the appreciation of their achievement which makes the bully feels inferior.^[15] Furthermore, bullies target popular workers as well as the most liked workers in the workplace as bullies always feel their social status which is threaten when see them.^[15]

In addition, the type of personality for both bully and victim plays an important role in the bullying happens workplace.^[14] Emamzadeh (2018) emphasized that bullies usually struggling with their negative emotional states such as anxiety, insecurity, or anger,^[16] while one study shows that bullies described themselves as highly aggressive and low in self-esteem.^[17]

Furthermore, work pressure also one of the causes of bullying as workload leads the bully to takes advantage of peak time at work to bully colleagues aiming to be the best at the workplace.^[16] Actually, the policy and demands of the company may make employees work in a competitive environment which is a suitable environment for bullies.^[18] Finally, some bullies target the colleagues prejudicially based on their race, gender, or even the age, as they tend to bully the ones different from them.^[15] Therefore, these are overall reasons that cause bullying in the workplace.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF BULLYING IN THE WORKPLACE

The fact that bullying is a widespread problem all over the world has many negative psychological and physical effects on the victims of bullying. The effects can be categorized into three main categories psychological, physical, and socioeconomic effects. First of all, the psychological effects are the most common result of bullying. A study done by Fahie and Devine (2014) regarding workplace bullying on primary teacher schools concluded that teachers who were victims of workplace bullying were struggling with stress, isolation, self-doubt, and insomnia.^[19] Besides, eight studies unanimously agree that there is an association between workplace bullying a suicidal thoughts.^[20] Psychological effects on the victims include stress, anxiety, and panic attacks.^[15] Another study verified that workplace bullying affects both men and women by feeling fatigued and lack of vigors all the time which may lead to depression.^[21]

In addition, there are also many physical consequences of workplace bullying. One of the studies has found that cardiovascular illness is increasing around 60% for the victims of bullying more than non bullied in the workplace.^[22] This is a really significant percent showing the risks of bullying that it might just start by a word. Moreover, bullying can cause high blood pressure as well as ulcers for adults bullied.^[23]

Researchers identified the medical effects of bullying by complaining of neck pains and fibromyalgia.^[21] Besides, several studies have proven a relationship between bullying and health issues such as migraine, irritability, bowel syndrome, and pains in the back and chest.^[24]

Furthermore, socioeconomic effects are the consequences of bullying on job performance. The job performance of bullied workers decreases significantly as they lose their concentration and have trouble decision making.^[15] Furthermore, the absenteeism from work increased for the victims of the bullying, which reduces productivity.^[21] Consequently, the quality of the customer service will lower which affects the motivation of the victims of workplace bullying. In brief, the effects of bullying in the workplace may differ from person to person and according to the type of bullying. Besides, the severity of the effects depends on how the victim perceive the situation.

THE POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS AND COPING STRATEGIES OF WORKPLACE BULLYING

The first strategy is to create a business ethics list by the business administration to reduce bullying in the workplace.^[25] It has been approved that professional work policies and procedures contribute to the prevention or discouragement of workplace bullying.^[26] Furthermore, one study done for examining the effects of good policies and training of the employees in different countries concluded that having clear and specific rules regarding work ethics and future problems reduces workplace bullying remarkably.^[27] Besides, work policies that contain zero-tolerance in the policy encourage commitment and limitations with everyone in the workplace which makes everybody equal and make the worker fired from work if violates the policy, regardless of his position will be expelled.^[28]

In addition, Lee, Lim, and Heath (2017) examined neglect, acquiescence, voice, exit, and retribution (NAVER) coping strategies in their study which depends on five different strategies,^[29] in which N refers to neglect that the bullied will not pay attention to the bully and just ignore it, while A refers to acquiescence which means humiliation of the bully's demands. Besides, V stands for voice where the victim is seeking to the solutions by replying to the bully orally or by talking to the boss; however, E refers to exist by trying to get out or avoiding the place of the bully, either by changing the place or position or by taking permission to be absent for a period of work. R for retribution replying in a similar way to the bully or take revenge. The study found that bullied workers tend to use the first three strategies more than others as they avoid confronting the bullies to reduce arising problems.^[28] However, ignoring the issue

of delaying the solution might worsen the problem and encourages rapid intervention to solve the problem which is more effective.^[9]

Moreover, researchers have shown that the best and effective strategies are based on the positive reinterpretation of the situation, relaxing strategy, and sharing the issue with a close and trusted person which helps in discouraging the situation of bullying effectively.^[30] Having family or friends support around the victims of bullying helps them to face his problem and solve it properly.^[31] In addition, the presence of a trainer in the work environment contributes to educating employees about bullying and how to properly deal with it.^[32] Crisis Prevention Institute (2018) supported the idea of training not only for preventing workplace bullying, but also to upgrade the company level and for a better reputation among other companies.^[33]

Last but not the least, if the strategies do not work with workers, Fair Work Commission (2020) suggests that the person should make it official and submit an anti-bullying form, where the issue will be investigated and solved based on their criteria that preserve workers' rights.^[6] Although not all countries have anti-bullying laws, one global study regarding international laws found that only 100 countries protect the rights of women against the violence that includes sexual harassment in the workplace.^[11]

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, statistics show the prevalence of workplace bullying at work in several countries. It was important to research and find out the causes and effects of bullying to have a wide perception about everything related to this issue. Thus, having a broad scope to examine the possible solutions or coping strategies, helps in eliminating this phenomenon effectively. It must be well known that unwanted acts cannot be labeled bullying unless it is characterized by repetition. Besides, the effects of workplace bullying are not just affecting the victim of bullying; however, the workplace also got affected by the decrease in the productivity and the absence of the work spirit. One of the best ways to eliminate bullying is to stop it before it starts. In other words, work policies that include anti-bullying can deter bullies and stop them before they start.

On the other hand, it was surprising that the laws in America and many other countries did not include workplace bullying as against the law. However, in the case of Australia, there was a great awareness regarding workplace bullying as the victims of bullying have the right to report any case of workplace bullying. The awareness of state laws of employee rights and the establishment of strict laws regarding workplace bullying contribute greatly to reduce the rate of bullying.

Moreover, undoubtedly, there are positive effects of the programs that aim to raise awareness in companies and workplaces regarding the risks of bullying as well as the coping strategies of the problem. Besides, placing banners and distributing educational brochures in the workplaces or companies may help. Furthermore, restating the work ethics might play an important role in being aware of the rights of colleagues and the required ethics in dealing with them. This could be applied by holding training courses about ethics or successful personality in dealing with work pressures as it seems attractive for workers or even establishing international conferences targeting employees and managers that contain group workshops and staff from different places. Hence, this will contribute to sharing experiences, increasing awareness of work ethics, and avoiding work problems, such as workplace bullying.

Finally, in terms of future study, further studies are needed especially regarding workplace bullying in sectors that suffer from bullying, such as factories. Further, it would be a good idea to conduct research studies to compare sectors that do not suffer from bullying and the sectors that suffer, to explore the reasons for not having workplace bullying phenomenon. Thus, the strategies used to reduce bullying in the workplace can be useful to apply in other sectors.

CONCLUSION

Tosumup, the most common types of bullying are verbal, physical, sexual, and cyber bullying. Although there are many causes of workplace bullying, they can be divided into causes related to the personality of the bully, such as low self-esteem, and causes regarding the workplace like work pressure. Besides, workplace bullying can lead to very serious consequences either psychological, physical, or even socioeconomic effects on victims. Thus, there are strategies that have been applied that have been shown positive results in reducing bullying in the workplace, such as establishing work policies that strictly prevent bullying, positively reinterpreting the situation for discouraging the bullying, and providing a training program to educate employees about the dangers of bullying.

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