

A Story to Tell: Bullying and Mobbing in the Workplace

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Abstract:

Bullying and mobbing are secretive, targeted, and widespread forms of abuse in the workplace (European Foundation, 2002). This behavior is designed to ostracize, isolate, undermine, and eliminate the person(s) being targeted. For reasons as yet unknown, this behavior appears to occur more frequently in the social service, health care, and educational sectors. Targets, often the most creative members of organizations, experience emotional and financial costs. Due to the loss of talented employees, a decrease in productivity, and staff demoralization, the costs to the organization are high. Multiple factors that create vulnerability are explored, as are potential points of intervention. Leaders, feeling helpless to intervene, may reinforce the culture of abuse. This phenomenon is a complex one that can only be addressed through systemic response and change in organizational culture. A framework for multi-level analysis and remediation is presented.

Keywords: administrative leadership, organizational change, workplace relationships, organizational bullying, mobbing behavior

Article:

Introduction

Bullying and mobbing (a covert form of group bullying) are violent, deliberate acts meant to harm another (Belak, 2002; Davenport, Schwartz, & Elliott, 2002; Denenberg & Bravernman, 2001; European Foundation, 2002). While this phenomenon is increasingly a focus of research and intervention in our elementary and secondary schools, until recently this form of violent intimidation and mistreatment of one person by another has not been recognized as common in the workplace (Lee & Brotheridge, 2006).

Given that social service, health, and educational occupations have higher rates of bullying than other organizations (European Foundation, 2002), workplace bullying and mobbing are of particular concern to social service organizations. Yet, little attention has been focused on the existence, causes, and consequences, of mobbing and bullying in the workplace, particularly in the United States (U.S.).

The phenomenon of bullying and mobbing has yet to be fully confronted, researched, and studied. The dynamics are complex and the incidence, prevalence, and high costs to victims and organizations are confirmed. Studies from Europe and Canada examine the phenomenon of bullying and mobbing exploring the prevalence, behavior, and impact (European Union, 2002). In the U.S. much of the research has been carried out by the Workplace Bullying Institute (WBI) and has focused solely on examining prevalence (Namie & Namie, 2009). While the scope has been limited, the findings strengthen our understanding of the links to targeting members of traditionally marginalized communities. Among the many consequences of bullying behavior are anxiety, withdrawal, low self-esteem, and other physical and mental health difficulties. Rather than recognizing these behaviors as a consequence of the abuse, too often they are turned into causes implying that the target is to blame, at least in part. Too often, the target of bullying (individual or group) is blamed for the violence committed by the bully, implying that the target must have done something to warrant the ire of others.

While the reason for the difference has yet to be studied, it has been established that the problem is almost three times as likely to occur in the social service, health, and educational professions than in other occupations (European Foundation, 2002). Further, research on, or even a discussion of, this phenomenon is noticeably missing from the social sciences literature, creating a gap in the professional knowledge base. As professionals we need to learn to care for and support each other, yet, little has been done by and for social scientists concerning bullying and mobbing in the workplace. In order to meet the needs of the people we work with, we need to create empathetic organizations in which we care for and about our professional communities and ourselves.

Naming and Describing the Behavior

Bullying and mobbing are “vindictive, cruel, malicious or humiliating attempts to undermine an individual or groups of employees” with mobbing additionally defined as a “concerted effort by a group of employees to isolate a co-worker through ostracism and denigration” (Denenberg & Braverman, 2001, p. 7). Perpetrators actively, though often covertly, seek to harm others--physically, emotionally, and spiritually, using tactics designed to injure individuals and create physical and psychological power imbalances (Burgess, Garbarino, & Carlson, 2006).

Mobbing is an extreme form of group bullying in which one or more employees covertly attacks another. The goal is to ostracize, isolate, and eliminate the target (Westhues, 2003). Offenders participate in character assassination, humiliation, and disruption as they place blame, criticize, and question ability. A group of factors is employed in combination to achieve a specific end result (Davenport, et al, 2002), including the use of scapegoating and innuendo along with spreading deprecating rumors, all while pretending to be nice in public encounters. The target is badgered, intimidated, and humiliated through persistent, targeted, hostile behavior (verbal and nonverbal) designed to undermine the integrity of the target. Through this process, the mobber, who is deliberate and intentional in their behavior and mindful of the consequences, enlists the cooperation of witnesses who participate, often accidentally, in the bully behavior. Those conscripted as “participants” may not understand the impact of his/her behavior as they are drawn into isolating and denigrating the target.

Table 1. Bullying/Mobbing Behavior

Interrupts the target in meetings
Sighs, rolls eyes, glares at target
Discounts/discredits target's ideas and accomplishments
Ignores target (silent treatment)
Intimidates through gestures
Questions target's competence
Insults the target
Yells and screams
Makes unreasonable demands
Steals credit for work done by target
Cuts target out of information loop
Blames target for fabricated errors
Nice to target in public; makes rude comments to or about target in private
Constant criticism of target
Poisons workplace with angry outbursts

Mobbing and bullying form a phenomenon that engages a process designed to dehumanize the other, which is anchored in hate and the denial of individual human needs. These are never benign activities, but rather, involve the deliberate destruction of another and in doing so are always violent acts. The perpetrators engage in a process of psychological (Belak, 2002) and emotional terrorism (Davenport et al., 2002) wherein the target or victim is driven into a helpless position (see description of behaviors in Table 1). Hate speech (see Cortese, 2006 and Ma, 1995 for further discussion on hate speech) is one mechanism that can be used to create and maintain the unequal power relationships of bullying and mobbing, particularly when the target is a member of a traditionally marginalized group. Hate speech is designed to harm and silence while creating a context for expanding micro-aggressions that support the waging of violence that appears normal.

This purposeful and willful destruction of another human being; consciously or unconsciously, deliberately or accidentally, is “now considered a major public health issue” (Burgess et al., 2006, p. 1). The International Labour Organization (ILO) recognizes emotional abuse as psychological violence, identifying bullying and mobbing as the two main forms of this violence (Denenberg & Braverman, 2001). Further, the ILO “gives equal emphasis to physical and psychological behaviour, and ...full recognition to the significance of minor acts of violence” (p. 7). The process may continue even after the target leaves the organization. For example, the offenders may continue negative rumors about the target amongst other organizations with which the target may seek employment. This assists the offender(s) in maintaining their position of “rightness” (Davenport et al., 2002) and power over the target.

Bullying and mobbing silence and marginalize targets as perpetrators seek to prevent targets and witnesses from engaging fully in their work, thereby denying them both supportive relationships and their individual identities. The bully decides to target an individual he or she finds threatening. This often involves targeting the “best employees-- those who are highly-skilled, intelligent, creative, ethical, able to work well with others, and independent (who refuse to be subservient or controlled by others)” (McCord & Richardson, 2001, p. 2). The targeted individual is ignored, isolated, excluded, and cut out of the communication loop (McCord & Richardson), with their livelihood and health--physical and mental--threatened (Namie & Namie, 2003). If the bully is in a position of formal power, they may also threaten the target with job loss and exhibit inconsistency with rule compliance (Namie & Namie).

Because people are social beings who “evolved with a desire to belong, not to compete” (Clark, 1990, p. 39), they need to form relationships with others. Given that these social bonds “are a biologically, physiologically, and psychologically based human needs” (p. 46), the worksite is more than a job. As individuals seek relationships it becomes a social environment that is central to the quality of everyday life. Not only do people seek to form relationships through work environment, but also to meet their identity needs (See Galtung, 1990, for a discussion of human needs theory). Identity, social interaction, and basic human needs are intertwined (Staub, 2003). Organizational violence, manifested as bullying and mobbing, inhibits the ability of individuals to meet their basic human needs. When individuals are unable to attain their goals and meet their needs intrapersonal and interpersonal conflict creates stress for targets, witnesses, and the organizational structure (see further discussion in Fisher, 1990 and Galtung, 1996).

Target Characteristics

Mobbing and bullying cut across the organization with targets and offenders who can be peers, subordinates, and/or superiors. These behaviors can begin with the administration; they can also begin among the staff who target superiors and/or colleagues (Namie & Namie, 2009). Bullying and mobbing are individual and group behaviors employed to resist change in work and social norms. Those targeted are often people who threaten the organizational stasis; and, the most common characteristics identified as reasons for being targeted are refusing to be subservient (58%), superior competence and skill (56%), positive attitude and being liked (49%), and honesty (46%) (Namie & Namie).

Occupation, gender, race, and age are all related to the risk of being mobbed, though as yet the dynamics underlying these differences have not been studied. Workers in social occupations (e.g., social/health services and education) are at a 2.8 times greater than average risk of being bullied or mobbed (European Foundation, 2002). Younger workers (under age 25) and older workers (over age 55) are at greater risk of being targets (European Foundation). The European Foundation identified women as at 75% greater risk of being targets and the WBI identified women, African Americans, and Latino/as as facing higher risks of being mobbed (Namie & Namie, 2009). Women are more likely to be targeted, while men are more likely to be bullies. On the other hand, female mobbers and bullies are more likely to target women than men while men bully both women and men (Namie & Namie, 2009). Research, to date, has examined the prevalence, but not identified the reasons for the gender differences. Historically marginalized groups are at greater risk. This is not surprising given that mobbing behavior builds from and reinforces prejudice (Davenport et al., 2002).

Organizational Context

Organizations tolerate bullies in positions of power, in part, because a narrative is created in which the good leader possesses the characteristics of a bully. Many offenders are in leadership roles and in privileged positions where they can inflict pain on their targets. Namie and Namie (2009) stated that “most bullies are bosses” (p. 26). Others, however, are peers who leave their targets and others in turmoil and confusion. Even people in supervisory and management roles can be mobbed (Namie & Namie).

While those who are cooperative and collaborative are too often framed as weak (Namie & Namie, 2009), the person who leads through temper tantrums, critical aggressive demands, greed, insulting behavior, and dominance is framed as a skilled leader. One of the consequences is that both the individuals and the organizational structures conspire to protect the bully/mobber. Organizational architectures that facilitate bullying and mobbing perpetuate structural violence. The complexity deepens when the two phenomena are intertwined. Through the process of mobbing, the target becomes vulnerable in the organization. Individual bullies in positions of power then attack, isolate, and eliminate their targets.

One of the difficulties in identifying mobbing is the secretive nature of the behavior (McCord & Richardson, 2001). The offender is difficult to recognize and name because publicly they frequently appear to be helpful and cooperative employees (Lee & Brotheridge, 2006; McCord & Richardson). Working from their own insecurities and fear of inadequacy, these offenders engage in covert attacks against the best workers (McCord & Richardson). On an organizational level, there is speculation that the process of group scapegoating provides a tension release for the organization or organizational unit (Polya as cited in Westhues, 2003). Paradoxically, although the process can create tension within the organization, at the same time it relieves the pressure by focusing the stress and blame for the stress on the target. Those participating in the mobbing ingratiate themselves to those with perceived power by exhibiting a readiness to attack the target (Polya as cited in Westhues).

Organizational cultures that support a veneer of civility can inadvertently reinforce bullying and mobbing behavior. A lack of overt, appropriate conflict can point to an organization that deals with conflict in backhanded ways (Coser, 1967). Team relationships are destroyed as the offending behavior operates “surreptitiously under the guise of being civil and cooperative” (McCord & Richardson, 2001, p. 1). Avoidance of conflict and unpleasantness can suppress discussion of crucial issues. This avoidance interferes with processes that are necessary for the pursuit of a common purpose and community (Massy, Wilger, & Colbeck, 1994).

Organizational environments that support the development of healthy relationships are rooted in communication patterns that are fact based, open, and supportive of dialogue. On the other hand, mobbing and bullying breed within a culture based on inaccurate or inadequate memory; dishonesty; quick judgments and a judgmental attitude; crisis response without thought and process; and the need for staff to take sides (Namie & Namie, 2003). Sameha’s experience exhibits some of these factors.

Sameha worked at the Social Work Department at Hayden Hospital for fifteen years. Her annual evaluations were consistently positive. Recently, a supervisor and several new staff were hired amidst other changes at the hospital. Most of the new staff formed strong connections with the new supervisor, Connie. Although transitions such as this can be disruptive, Connie did not address the ensuing conflict amongst the staff. Some of the new social workers started ridiculing Sameha’s ideas and suggestions. Sameha approached Connie, to discuss the difficulties. She did not feel like Connie listened and the meeting ended abruptly with Connie accusing Sameha of being inflexible with change. Connie told her to go back and make an effort to “get along.”

Sameha tried to change her behavior and spent several months reaching out to new staff. Peers who previously were supportive, tried to avoid Sameha. Over the next six months, Sameha became increasingly depressed and was frequently ill. Her absences and lack of enthusiasm were noted on her

annual evaluation and she was put on probation. Sameha reached out to an upper administrator, Carlos, but was told that it was inappropriate for her to go around Connie. Sameha left the institution not long after that.

Because she blamed herself, she did not return to work in the social work field. During the next year she heard from several of her peers who had been supportive before the transition but avoided her once she was targeted by the new staff. One by one, each became the target. They all eventually left the hospital.

As exemplified, employers seldom examine and redress the wrongs perpetrated against the target of workplace mobbing (Leymann, 1987, as cited in Leymann, 1990; Namie & Namie, 2009; Westhues, 2003) and other forms of bullying (McCord & Richardson, 2001). Some of the organizational structures which support bullying and mobbing are poor management, denial of conflict, intensely stressful environment, unethical activities (Davenport et al., 2002), closed systems, and constricted, ineffective, secretive, incompetent, and indirect communication (Namie & Namie, 2003). Because the offenders are maintained and the system left in tact, in the vast majority of cases studied, the scapegoating and ostracizing continues as administrators and new employees are drawn into this workplace virus (Namie & Namie, 2009).

Consequences

The Target

The negative consequences of bullying and mobbing are greater and more common for the target than for the offender (European Foundation, 2002). While “bullies need targets to live; targets find it hard to live when bullies intrude in their lives” (p. 4). Targets experience isolation and shame; may lose their employment or have their employability negatively impacted; experience mental health and/or physical crises; and are at risk of suicide (European Foundation; McCord & Richardson, 2001) (see Table 2).

A large study of mobbing behavior in Germany (European Foundation) found that almost all (98.7%) of those targeted experienced employment and/or health consequences. Close to half (43.9%) became ill and 68.1% left their employment (includes 14.8% who were dismissed). The WBI found that 77% of targets changed employment (Namie & Namie, 2009). Dr. Heinz Leymann, who first identified this syndrome, estimated that workplace mobbing was responsible for 15% of suicides in Sweden (Leymann, 1990).

Table 2. Changes Experienced by Targets

<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Poor concentration● Insomnia● Substance abuse● Headaches● Gastrointestinal disorders● Depression● Anxiety● Exhaustion● Suspicion● Fear● Forgetfulness● Fatigue● Failure to pay bills● Crying● Irritability● Change in appearance

(Davenport, et al, 2002; European Foundation, 2002; McCord & Richardson, 2001)

The Offender

Offenders often face no consequences. The European Foundation (2002) found that only 19.3% (including the 8.2% dismissed) were required to change employment while the WBI found that only 23% of bullies were punished (Namie & Namie, 2009). Target isolation and sense of shame, along with the silencing of witnesses, help assure the permanence of the offender in the organization (Namie & Namie, 2009). Because the offenders

are maintained and the system left intact, in the vast majority of cases studied, the scapegoating and ostracizing continues as administrators and new employees are infected by this workplace virus (Namie & Namie, 2009).

The Organization

The WBI found that only 1.7% of employers “conducted [a] fair investigation and protected [the] target from further bullying with negative consequences for the bully” (Namie & Namie, 2009, p. 315). The costs of this failure to respond with organizational change are significant (Davenport et al., 2002; Dunn, 2003). Mobbing and bullying are disruptive to ongoing operations and staff relations (see Table 3) while organizations suffer through the loss of their best employees. Among the consequences of not addressing these behaviors are increased staff demoralization and decreased productivity and creativity (McCord & Richardson, 2001).

Mobbing “destroys morale, erodes trust, cripples initiative, and results in dysfunction, absenteeism, resignations, guilt, anxiety, paranoia, negativity, and marginal production. Key players leave and the effects are long-lasting” (McCord & Richardson, p. 2). Leaders at all organizational levels need to ask: If targets did not start out as difficult employees, what happened? The answer is usually the presence of a toxic work environment that supports a culture of secrecy, rumor, and innuendo and the presence of a veneer that brushes over organizational violence.

Table 3. Organizational Costs

● Loss of best employees	● Anxiety
● Demoralization of staff	● Decrease in productivity and creativity
● Resignations	● Increased absenteeism
● Unable to hire diverse staff	● Loss of trust
● Disruption of operations and staff relations	● System stays in place when players change
● Company reputation suffers	

Implications for Leadership and Intervention

Administrative response to mobbing and bullying incidents that resulted in an end to the destructive behavior involved quick action by various stakeholders (Westhues, 1998). Bullying, individual and group, can be controlled or eradicated by shifting the environment away from factors that support the offending behavior, and toward the creation of a culture of respect (McCord & Richardson, 2001) and empathy. An environment is created where negative social behaviors are no longer valued; and, the resources needed to remediate the health and employment consequences of bullying and mobbing are provided. Response starts with higher administration sensitizing and training individuals in leadership roles. The skillful employer purges bullies while poor one’s promote them (Namie & Namie, 2003).

When a tear in the social fabric of an organization occurs, it is incumbent upon the leaders to take decisive action. Organizations, as places of contention and hostility, are destructive and unhealthy. The problem is not too much conflict; rather, it is the failure to manage conflict productively. Fruitful conflict is essential to organizational growth. Organizations that do not manage conflict effectively develop unhealthy structures that produce and support “evil” actors (Galtung, 1990, 1996). Bullies and mobbers exploit bad structures to their advantage, using them to support forms of othering and dehumanization. Power is gained through the intentional destruction of others with the means of destruction reified as normal.

There is no neutrality within the violent context that feeds bullying and mobbing. “Morally courageous people, as active bystanders, can make a crucial difference at important moments in many settings” (Staub, 2003, p. 5). Frank de Mink (2010) uses moral development framework to describe a suspension of conscience that allows management and other bystanders to support the process of violence. Bystander inaction signals to both the target and the bully/mobber that the behavior is acceptable (van Heugten, 2010).

Leadership Style

While laissez-faire leadership creates an environment that breeds mobbing, authoritarian leadership breeds bullying behavior. Just knowing the leadership style, however, is inadequate for understanding the dynamics that maintain mobbing and bullying cultures (Einarsen, 2010). In fact, leadership style cannot, by itself, explain the development and response of these behaviors (Einarsen). As Einarsen reports, current models do not supply the theoretical dimensions needed to support the assessment of leaders as both good and bad. Leadership models with the depth required for exploring this phenomenon include dimensions that evaluate leadership support for both organizational goals and the goals and interests of the individual.

In a workplace environment that is built on a narrative that values staff needs for identity, belonging, and social interaction, workers are humanized. Cooperation, compassion, empathy, and mutual aid are engendered and employees work together to meet mutual goals, becoming allies rather than threats. Instead of viewing each other as competitors for scarce resources, organizational members are seen as collaborators; and differences in work styles and skills are valued, not feared. Workplaces become sites of individual and organizational growth. Organizational members assist each other in achieving their individual and collective needs.

The Physical Space

Creating shared and sacred space where organizational members engage in humane discourse is an important requirement. The physical limitations of buildings can make the creation of sacred space challenging, but it must be done. Individuals need opportunities to bond with others and to create people-centered communities defined by trust and dignity. Establishing spaces where dialogue is encouraged underscores the importance of relationship and runs counter to the dehumanization of isolation. The development of a culture of respect is facilitated by frequent interactions, places for staff to gather, incorporation of difference as creative capital, energized debates, and effective leadership (Massy et al., 1994). Open communication, which breaks the culture of silence in which bullying behavior thrives, is imperative.

Communication, Change, and Decision Making

The culture of silence is disrupted through a process similar to that used to disrupt groupthink. A skilled facilitator, outside the system of abuse and also outside the management chain that supports bullying and mobbing dynamics, is necessary. The process of remediation requires open, free, blunt, honest, well-informed discussion by multiple constituencies (Westhues, 2003). The creation of “community is crucial in fulfilling needs for connection and identity” (p. 10), which shift the dynamics of interaction and bravery in facing dehumanizing behavior. The respect for energized debate and differing opinions are a sign of a healthy institution. Divergent thinking is encouraged in a safe, inviolable environment.

The development of processes for making decisions about when to invest and when to terminate, along with a plan that protects targets and organizational integrity, is essential to assuring the safety of other staff when employees with a history of offending behavior are retained. Confronting and disempowering offenders is necessary. The response of offenders to confrontation determines the next steps. Staff accidentally drawn into the process of bullying without understanding their role can be educated and supported in change. Those who deliberately employ psychological violence for power, due to personality problems, and/or poor sense of self require intensive intervention and monitoring. Negotiating with bullies is useless and inappropriate as it validates their unacceptable behavior.

Working with Individuals

On the individual level, intervention focuses on anyone who has been a target or witness of workplace bullying or mobbing; and, on the administrators and staff who have responsibility for intervening. Public support of the target through multi-level recognition of her/his accomplishments, competence, innocence, and value to the organization, starts the creation of a healing environment. It is essential to help those who have lived through bullying and mobbing to reframe their experience. Individuals can come to view themselves as survivors of a violent assault. As a survivor, one gains and maintains power and bullies and mobbers are denied power-over. In surviving, both targets and witnesses build resilience. Carmen’s experience exemplified some of the key

factors.

Carmen joined the Department of Human Services six months ago with an MSW and several years experience in child welfare. She is creative in contributing to conversations during staff meetings. Each time she speaks, however, several of the staff look at each other and roll their eyes. Frequently, she is cut-off in mid-sentence. Last week, she heard rumors about herself that have no basis in truth. Because her immediate supervisor, David, supports the staff who started the rumor and is part of the group which interrupts her, she decided to talk with his supervisor, Sandra.

Sandra listened intently, indicating a sense of understanding, and a willingness to “believe” Carmen’s perceptions and observations. Sandra said she would follow up and return to discuss her observations with Carmen. After spending time in the department--watching, listening, and asking questions, Sandra decided that there was a problem. Because she previously suspected that some of the better staff were being isolated and “pushed out,” Sandra decided to address the issues both individually and systemically.

Sandra worked with Carmen to build a system of support. Sandra also spoke to David. He steadfastly blamed all of the problems on Carmen saying “she is the kind of person who draws this on herself.” Because of his response, Sandra moved David out of the department and back into a line staff position with a strong supervisor. She decided to provide him with an opportunity to recognize and change his behavior so that he could stay with the agency. She did not, however, want him in a role with supervisory responsibility over Carmen.

Sandra informed the staff that she would be bringing in one of the agency’s strongest supervisors. She also informed them that she and the new supervisor would be meeting with each of them individually for their annual reviews. A review in six months showed significant change in individual interactions and employee satisfaction with their jobs.

After listening and observing, the supervisor took decisive action. It is a leader’s responsibility to assist organizational members in reweaving the social tapestry. Deliberate, positive communication that engages reasoned and coordinated cooperation supports group processes that set aside the strict and sole focus on the individual and refocuses to also center collective interests (Habermas, 1984), strategies that decrease the dehumanizing effects of bullying and mobbing. Genuine dialogue re-humanizes targets and witnesses, and structural and direct violence are reduced. The process of re-humanizing targets contributes to the peaceful transformation of conflict and reconciliation of the disputants’ relationship.

While 96% of bullying incidents are witnessed, for many reasons the witnesses (bystanders) do not come to the aid of the target (Namie & Namie, 2003). Van Heugten (2010) found that the relationships between targets, witnesses, and bystanders are complex with the vast majority of bystanders remaining passive. Activating bystanders shifts the message and has the potential to create change agents (van Heugten). There are many ways co-workers, friends, and family can assist a target. First, targets need someone to listen, uncritically and empathically to their stories of the bullying and the impact it has on them. Co-workers can be helped to interrupt and neutralize the bullying/mobbing by refusing to allow the target to be isolated or defamed and by confronting the bully regarding their behavior. Witnesses to the bullying or mobbing can offer to document the incident in writing, providing a copy to the target.

By becoming an ally the potential for isolation is immediately decreased. Persons become open witnesses to the experience and set a model for other faculty/staff as they talk with peers, those who are not participating in the bullying or mobbing intentionally, about joining as allies with the target(s). They can also confront or dislodge bully behavior when it occurs. One way to begin this process is to refuse to hold secrets or carry rumors. Finally, witnesses can impact the system by talking collectively with an administrator or supervisor.

To help relieve tension, organizations can develop cultures in which individuals can safely address work issues with others. By changing behavior and patterns of interaction, witnesses can be empowered to shift the organization's communication style. Communication policies need to be two-fold. On the one hand, policies that support leaders and managers in refusing to speak about another member of the organization in that member's absence break links of secrecy. Individuals are then provided an opportunity to engage in discussions that have them as the subject. Sharing information prevents rumors from developing and communication from taking on a hostile form. On the other hand, structures that support the reporting of targeting behavior cannot be blocked by rigid rules of hierarchy that interfere with open communication about abusive conduct.

Summary

Bullying and mobbing behaviors are widespread in organizations, particularly social service, health, and educational organizations. The negative consequences are apparent in our communities and organizations. Because bullying and mobbing dynamics both thrive in a dehumanizing, competitive environment, remediation of either or both and the establishment of an environment intolerant to these behaviors involves the same basic components. Organizational environments that work counter to these behaviors are respectful, empathetic, productive in managing conflict, provide spaces for interaction and dialogue, encourage open communication, celebrate and welcome difference, are intolerant of targeting, and create spaces for informal interaction.

The consequences for targets of organizational violence often result in physical, psychological, and emotional injury. Common mental health consequences include post-traumatic stress, low self-esteem, damage to self-confidence, anxiety and depression, poor concentration, exhaustion, and insomnia. Physical consequences include gastrointestinal disorders, headaches, and substance abuse. Witnesses of workplace violence suffer as well and organizations experience a lowering of staff moral, increased absenteeism, and decreased creativity. Effective response supports the target as she/he comes to understand the phenomena to which she/he has been subjected. It is important for the target to recognize that they are not at fault and to reconnect with her/his sense of self—not the distorted perspective the bully has been trying to get others to adopt. Educating the target about the options available (including the legal ones) and identifying the necessity and availability of support can be empowering. It is rare that a target confronts a bully, but it can be effective to simply tell the offender that the behavior will not be tolerated.

In a mobbing situation, only response from higher administrators is likely to resolve the structural and therefore ongoing problems; rarely, however, do administrators take steps on behalf of the target and the witnesses who are also traumatized. Supervisors and administrators educated about mobbing and bullying, and the importance of focusing on both organizational and individual needs, have a broader lens through which they can monitor the work-life climate of the organization. The heightened awareness gained by leaders and administrators can then be integrated into the implementation of traditional management strategies, such as walking around, observing, listening, talking, and asking questions.

While administrative leadership is needed to remediate the impact of bullying and mobbing on the organization and the individuals, our knowledge of the significant leadership dimensions is limited. New research (Einarsen, 2010) identifies additional dimensions that add depth to the assessment of leadership effectiveness beyond examining leadership style. These include a dual commitment to the health and development of both the individual and the organization. Evaluating the phenomenon of bullying and mobbing at the intersection of leadership style and the dual commitment to the individual and the organization offers promise for increasing the effectiveness of prevention, intervention, and remediation.

Note:

1 Sameha and Carmen are pseudonyms based on composites of female social workers who have been targets of bullying/mobbing. These women shared their stories with the authors following presentations on the topic of workplace mobbing and bullying.

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