Spring-Summer 2017 Manager Newsletter

Bullying in the workplace:

Workplace bullying has received a lot of attention in recent years. Although we hope we won't ever have to deal with it, some of us will face it at some point in our careers. Unlike the bullies we might have encountered in school, who may have used physical tactics, workplace bullies generally use words and actions to intimidate their victims. It may not be quite as obvious as physical bullying, but it can be just as damaging. Bullying in the workplace can have serious consequences for everyone- the individual/s being bullied, those who witness the bullying, co-workers, and the organization as a whole.

What is workplace bullying?

It's persistent, unwanted, offensive behaviors that are intended to humiliate, threaten or intimidate someone. Bullying can take many forms.

Verbal bullying: Insults, name-calling, gossip, offensive remarks, or making someone the butt of jokes.

Non-verbal bullying: Threatening or offensive gestures.

Physical bullying: Pushing, poking, tripping, obstructing someone's way, damaging or stealing someone's property.

Cyber bullying: This type of bullying can be done anonymously and distributed quickly. It can be difficult, if not impossible, to trace the source. As a result this type of bullying can be very damaging. Cyber bullying can occur 24/7 and impact the victim not just at work, but in their private life as well. Examples of cyber bullying are using cell phones, computers or other electronic devices to threaten, intimidate, offend or harm someone. This might include the use of social media, e-mail, texts etc.

Work Interference: This can include overwork or not giving someone enough to do, creating meaningless tasks for someone, withholding information necessary to do one's job, setting unrealistic deadlines, giving unclear instructions, taking credit for someone else's work.

Exclusion: Socially or physically excluding someone from work-related meetings or activities.

There are many reasons bullying may exist in a workplace. But one of the biggest reasons is that many victims don't report it to their manager, supervisor or human resources.

When it comes to workplace bullying the intention of the bully isn't relevant. What is relevant is the effect the behavior has on the victim.

Why might someone become a workplace bully?

There can be many reasons. A bully might be someone who wants to deflect negative attention onto someone else. They might be someone who is arrogant or feels he/she is untouchable. A bully may feel the need to control others, or may be someone who uses bullying behavior to hide their own deficiencies. They may be someone who feels little remorse.

Why might someone become a target?

Someone who becomes a target may be more popular than the bully and is seen as competition. They may be a more forgiving or tolerant person. A target may be seen as less assertive or have a need to be well liked by others.

Common ways bullies rationalize their behavior:

- "I'm not a bully, I'm just a tough manager"- Managers sometimes bully to hide their weaknesses and/or incompetence.
- "I'm just being assertive"-there's a difference between aggressiveness and assertiveness. Bullies typically don't differentiate between the two. Assertive requests are respectful. Aggressiveness is usually demanding and disrespectful.
- "They let me bully them"-targets don't invite abuse. Bullies select their victims because of jealousy, vulnerability or availability.
- "It's just my personality-it's not intentional"-the way a bully behaves is a choice. Lack of accountability is common among bullies.
- "It's not my fault they're inadequate"-Bullies often label their targets in this way. However it's usually the bully that feels inadequate.
- "We just don't get along"-Personality conflicts usually involve two people of equal status who don't see eye to eye. Bullying usually involves one person who has targeted the other in an attempt to exclude or undermine them.

Consequences of Bullying:

Emotionally the victim may experience stress and anxiety, reduced self-esteem, panic attacks, poor concentration and/or forgetfulness. They may feel on edge and hypersensitive and may experience flashbacks. Physically the victim may become ill more often, experience aches and pains, headaches, fatigue, sleeplessness, and digestive disturbances among other things. Behaviorally they may be tardy or absent more often, tearful or angry at work, isolate themselves or engage in drug or alcohol abuse.

Observers may experience low productivity and morale, or even leave their jobs. They may be afraid to get on the bully's bad side, may feel their job is at risk if they get involved, may blame the victim or ally themselves with the bully.

The company is impacted in that productivity may decline, employee morale may decrease, the company may have a difficult time attracting and retaining talent and there may be an increase in employee turnover.

How can workplace bullying be prevented?

All policies regarding bullying should be made clear so employees know how specific issues would be handled if they occur. Orientations should be conducted for all new hires to familiarize them with all policies and expectations.

Managers and supervisors should be trained as to how to manage employee issues, when and how use disciplinary measures, when and how to utilize HR, and how to set a good example of appropriate workplace behavior.

There should be an "open door" policy for employees and a fair grievance process.

Communication should take place frequently via meetings, newsletters, forums etc.

A performance management system should be implemented which includes formal reviews and performance appraisals on a regular basis.

Progressive discipline strategies should be used when necessary. If an employee needs to be terminated the process needs to be transparent and well documented.

Creating the right workplace culture:

There are a number of things managers can do to create an environment where bullying is less likely to happen:

Staff should be educated on bullying in the workplace and how to effectively deal with a bully-whether they are the target or an observer.

All employees should be encouraged to behave professionally and respectfully.

If bullying occurs it should be addressed quickly before things escalate.

There should be a clear system for reporting bullying and all complaints should be dealt with promptly and as confidentially as possible.

Activities that support and promote unity in the workplace should be encouraged.

Occasionally checking in with employees to determine if bullying is occurring can be useful.

How can bullying be managed when it does occur?

A manager can approach the bully and provide feedback as to what others are observing about his or her behavior. The manager can teach conflict resolution and communication strategies if they have the skills to do so, and if the employee is receptive to working with the manager. HR should be included in this process as well.

As with any other employee related issue everything should be carefully documented.

If the manager and/or HR staff don't feel they have the skills to work with the employee they should consider make a formal management referral to the employee assistance program (EAP).

In some cases a manager doesn't have the skills necessary to stop the bullying behavior. Perhaps the manager is afraid to approach the bully or hasn't been trained deal with bullies. Maybe the manager has been a target. Or perhaps she is afraid to address the behaviors because of fear that HR won't support her, or that there will be legal retaliation.

The bottom line is that if there are no negative consequences for the bully, the bully feels empowered to continue the behavior.

If bullying is to stop there needs to be investigation and documentation of all observations and conversations with the bully, the target and any witnesses. Disciplinary action may need to be taken against the bully. If disciplinary action is needed a manager should partner with HR.

Not addressing bullying in the workplace affects the target, his/her coworkers and the organization as a whole. It's essential that managers familiarize themselves with the organization's policies as well as the resources available to them so if they face this issue they are equipped to handle it.

The Employee Assistance Program can be a great resource if you need some help with strategies for dealing with bullying in the workplace. The EAP can be reached by calling 800-466-8282. You can also check out the website at: alternativeseap.com. The website has articles, videos and resources on a variety of topics.