

CREATING POSITIVE WORKPLACE CULTURE TO REDUCE WORKPLACE BULLYING

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to highlight the problem of workplace bullying and provide suggestions for organizational processes that might prevent it from occurring. The study explains why workplace bullying exists and how certain organizational structures, cultures, or leadership styles can contribute to and reinforce negative behavior. This study includes both qualitative primary and secondary research sources. It provides recommendations for creating a positive work environment by applying organizational virtuousness practices that may inhibit or mitigate negative behaviors. The findings will offer diagnostic suggestions and proactive structural efforts that can help minimize the opportunity for bullying.

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KEYWORDS: Bullying, Management, High Performance, Human Resources, Leadership, Organizational Virtuousness

INTRODUCTION

Environmental pressures such as the COVID-19 pandemic, supply chain disruptions, and staff shortages have underscored the need for businesses to be agile, adaptable, and high performing to sustain and thrive through these competitive pressures. A bullying environment in the workforce reduces a firm's ability to be successful by reducing agility, adaptability, and high performance (Gercans, 2021). Historically, organizations have been reluctant or ineffective in confronting and addressing workplace bullying (WPB), resulting in higher human capital costs, employee resignations, a decline in company reputation, difficulty in replacing employees, and higher costs (Hodgins et al., 2020). Changing employee expectations of the firm and workplace and full employment has underscored the importance of diagnosing and solving bullying in organizations (Cooney, Marshall, & Zaharchuk, 2022). This paper aims to show how bullying limits an organization's ability to be high performing and provide diagnostic suggestions and solutions, both acute and proactive, to eliminate bullying.

This research will inform human resource personnel and organizational leaders about the benefits of creating a positive culture to minimize the potential for workplace bullying to develop. It will work to reduce the likelihood that workplace bullying will develop instead of treating the behavior after it has happened. The goal is to proactively create a high-performing environment that fosters teamwork, communication, employee development, and organizational virtuousness. The article will present current research with a summary of the literature review. It will then share the primary and secondary research data and methodology followed by a summary of results. The authors provide concrete recommendations for proactively developing a positive corporate culture to create productive environments conducive to maximizing business objectives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The American Psychological Association (2022) defines bullying as A form of aggressive behavior in which someone intentionally and repeatedly causes another person injury or discomfort. Workplace bullying happens when an employee or employees are repeatedly exposed over time to repeated aggressive behavior from another that can include negative acts, tormenting comments, social isolation, harassment, insults, and offensive remarks. Bullying can take the form of physical contact, words, or more subtle actions. (para.1) Bullying is not a boss chewing out an employee for a mistake or a one-time comment. Bullying is a repeated and long-lasting aggressive behavior, usually lasting 12 months or more (Einarsen, Skogstad, 1996; Sigursteinsdottir, Rafnsdottir & Jonsdottir, 2020).

Bullying is different from harassment in that harassment is defined as unwanted conduct creating an environment that is intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating, or offensive (Spencer, 2015). It can be challenging to distinguish bullying behavior from harassment. This research focuses on bullying, which is intentional, repeated, and designed to cause a specific person harm or injury. In contrast, harassment is more general and is focused on a particular type of person or behavior, such as harassment of women, harassment of blacks, or harassment of production workers. The primary types of bullying that occur in an organizational context are verbal, relationship, and physical. Verbal bullying includes saying or writing mean things, name-calling, and making lewd sexual, harassing, or threatening comments. Relationship bullying involves damaging a person's reputation, spreading rumors, excluding, or embarrassing someone. Physical bullying can involve hurting a person or their possessions. Examples include hitting, pushing, spitting, or breaking personal property (What is Bullying, 2022). In the workplace, the context in which bullying occurs might include intimidation threats, social exclusion, spying, or other invasions of privacy. It can be related to work performance, for example, wrongful accusations, sabotaging work products, interference, stealing, or taking credit for ideas. Bullying can be retaliatory, exclusion from office activities, or denial of promotions. Bullying can also be institutional-when the workplace accepts, allows, or encourages bullying-for example, bullied doctoral candidates sometimes see it as a rite of passage to getting a doctorate (Ziani, 2021). Bullying is widespread in organizations and can be very personal. Studies show that bullying has a strong negative mental and physical effect on both victims and bystanders, impacting the survivors and their willingness to stay in the organization (Rospenda, Richman, & Shannon, 2009). Bullying is a universal phenomenon; however, national, and cultural factors may impact perceptions of bullying behaviors and how to deal with them (Salin, Cowan, et al., 2020).

Workplace bullying is a serious financial and operational issue. It can lead to a toxic work environment, negatively affecting employees' health, reducing productivity and morale, and resulting in higher turnover (Hollis, 2012; Keashly & Neuman, 2010; Persky, 2018). It is difficult to manage workplace bullying because it is not defined as illegal in most US states as it is in many other countries around the globe. There are few laws addressing bullying in the workplace, and it may be difficult to quantify the business impact, which would help organizations react more swiftly. This study suggests that creating a high-performance work environment can develop a foundation for positive interaction rather than fostering negative behavior. As Thompson, Baughan & Motwani (1998) indicate, high-performing team members use and should exhibit the following: listening skills, team spirit, commitment, managing conflict, empowering communication, and interpersonal skills. "Relationships that evoke a win/lose mental model need to be reframed into collaborative partnerships" (Thompson, Baughan & Motwani, 1998) The high performing team interaction requires group members to have social skills that counter workplace bullying behavior. "In today's COVID-19 world, however, it's becoming more prevalent among co-workers who disagree on wearing face masks and social distancing, and they view these practices as political statements and personal choices rather than practical health care guidelines (Falcone 2020, SHRM)." An essential step in combatting workplace bullying is determining organizational features that might enable bullying. Ziani (2021) notes many aspects of organizational culture may accidentally foster bullying and should therefore be revised. These elements

include: The quest for excellence (e.g., top chefs in the kitchen industry). An organizational culture that celebrates toughness (e.g., army, prisons, firefighters).

A socialization process that features initiation rituals (e.g., hazing).

A large number of informal and casual behaviors that make it more difficult for some employees to distinguish "proper and professional" behaviors from "borderline and inappropriate" behaviors (para 22).

The "quest for excellence" in an organizational culture that celebrates toughness, such as in doctoral programs or Navy Seal training, may accidentally create a bullying culture (Ziani, 2022). Hazing or initiation rituals, sometimes found in education or nursing, can facilitate a bullying environment. Those aspects of organizational culture can serve useful purposes; however, when many are present, it is important to be mindful that they can facilitate bullying. Surveying the population, particularly if done by an outside firm, may result in statistical tendencies that show bullying is occurring in the organization or that the characteristics of a bullying culture exist in the organization (Tolle, Sundburg, Bruhn & Hunt, 2020).

An approach to address workplace bullying that has not received much attention is proactively limiting the drivers that lead to or at least reinforce the negative behavior. These proactive approaches are not to replace responses shown to be effective in confronting a bullying problem but to augment by working to mitigate or minimize the issue taking root. There are several problem-solving methodologies built on the traditional model of problem identification, generating possible solutions, implementation, and evaluation (Nikols 2020). Most problem-solving methods are deficit-based, meaning once a problem is detected, there is a reaction to identify the cause of the problem. This approach is necessary within and outside organizations but can be of little use once the damage is done. The reaction approach functions as a lagging indicator, particularly with bullying, as the target and bystanders are often reluctant to bring the problem to stakeholders for help. An alternative approach is asset-based and uses the existing strengths of the organization and workforce to get out in front of workplace bullying and prevent the behavior when it does occur, to minimize the damage done to the target, bystanders, perpetrators, and the organization itself.

High-performing organizations and teams are not immune to workplace bullying, sexual harassment, collective bargaining, or day-to-day conflict. However, the characteristics often associated with high-performance work cultures and teams may provide strategies to make it difficult for bullying to become established. High-performing team characteristics, as described in the following sections, include widely distributed decision-making where autonomy is encouraged. High-performing team characteristics also include collaboration, accountability, the multi-directional flow of communication, and transparency. High-performing team characteristics do not include top-down, directed management which can inhibit information flow and communication (Flood & Klausner, 2018).

WPB involves hostile and abusive communications and behavior typically targeted to one individual in a patterned and escalating manner (Lutgen-Sandvik, Hood, Jacobson, 2016). WPB is also known to affect the target's and bystanders' psychological safety, physical and emotional well-being, and subsequent engagement and retention. Positive workplace behavior and organizational virtuousness (OV) are contradictory to the negative culture, behaviors, and environment workplace bullying presents and spreads throughout the workplace. While still a newer construct related to organizations, OV presents an opportunity to leverage positive workplace practices and norms that typify high-performance workplace cultures and teams to get out in front of workplace bullying before it starts or at least confront it more quickly before escalation occurs. Applying positive workplace behavior and organizational virtuousness to positively impact creativity, citizenship behavior, productivity, reduce stress and turnover has been well established. What is new is exploring the impact of positive behavior, notably OV characteristics as a mediating factor to minimize incidents of WPB.

A study by Lutgen-Sandvik, Hood, and Jacobson (2016) looked at this question and found mixed results. Overall, when WPB levels were low to moderate, as measured by the Negative Acts Questionnaire, OV factors did have a beneficial effect on WPB behavior. However, in organizations where bullying levels were high, the beneficial effects were reduced. This may be partly attributed to the negativity bias human beings possess, where negative interactions, events, and actions are emotionally experienced much more strongly than the same types of events on the positive side (Winn, 2021). This hints that positive workplace behavior and OV may not be effective without the corresponding systems and processes identified by the authors earlier in this article. There is another approach applying the characteristics of OV to address WPB in the healthcare sector. The initiative focused on applying compassion to colleagues and co-workers that caregivers delivered to patients. This is notable because WPB behavior shows a higher incidence in healthcare compared to other industrial sectors (Simpson, Farr-Wharton & Reddy, 2020). As this paper has noted, many efforts to address WPB have been made to reduce harm and respond to the situations after they were brought to the attention of appropriate decision-makers. However, the goal is to create a proactive approach to the problem by building competencies around organizational compassion, a key characteristic of the OV construct (Simpson et., al., 2020) The model chosen to build this competency is notice, empathize, assess, and respond (NEAR). Interestingly similar models of expanding compassion in the workplace are referred to as "compassionate" and/or "non-violent" communication (Ziola, 12/8/22 Virtual Presentation). The efficacy of this approach is that it is behavioral, fact based, and without judgment thus de-escalating emotion by providing a safe outlet for sharing difficult situations. With respect to WPB, the absence of perceived judgment is critical as embarrassment or shame often prevents or delays people from coming forward. Colleagues were coached in using the NEAR model to respond to managers and decision-makers to confront bullying behavior while emphasizing compassion for the perpetrator of WPB and the target. The approach was not to fix the problem immediately but to recognize, and confront it with empathy, problem-solve, and recommend resources for assistance.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This study used a combination of primary and secondary research. Primary research was conducted using in-depth interviews with employees in higher education during the Spring of 2018. Participants were recruited through personal and professional networks. Demographic information was collected for background and an interview protocol with prepared questions was used for consistency of discussion. Twelve interviews were conducted with administrators (4), faculty (5), and human resource personnel (3) to gain insight and experience with workplace bullying. The interviewees were from several different colleges that were all 4-year private, not-for-profit, small to medium, in suburban or small city locations. The interviews were confidential; thus, no identifying information was used on the bully or the target. Secondary sources provided material on high-performing work teams, organizational virtuousness, and case study examples of workplace bullying situations that were made public by published sources.

RESULTS

The Primary research provided new insights into how and why bullying occurs in higher education. Much of the prior research on workplace bullying in higher education was designed to measure the frequency of occurrence or investigate the impact that bullying had on the targets (Hollis, 2012; Keashly & Neuman 2010). There has been little research investigating the organizational structure and processes that impact and allow this behavior to continue (Keashly & Neuman, 2010). The participants experienced workplace bullying in the form of both verbal and emotional abuse. One participant, an administrator, noted she experienced "outright anger, yelling and throwing things." A human resource employee reported seeing behavior that "crossed the line and was disrespectful". Another human resource employee observed supervisors "calling down someone in a public meeting". The ability to address workplace bullying is driven by the employee's role and the perpetrator's power in the organization. A faculty member indicated she felt bullied but the bully "was in such a position of power and I did not want it to be held against me".

An administrator stated that they “could not respond honestly in a meeting where my supervisor was sitting right across the table”.

Participants reiterated one of the primary tenets of leadership: leadership sets the tone for an organization. Leaders who are either laissez-faire or bullies themselves allow this behavior to fester unchecked.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Building a Proactive Bullying Prevention Program from Within

High-performance work environments may reduce workplace aggression; however, for maximum effect, it needs to be combined with active leadership to avoid undesirable negative consequences (Salin, Baillien, & Notelaers, 2022). Proactively establishing an employee code of conduct, regular training, coordinated HR policies, and engagement by the executive team can establish the message that bullying is unacceptable. Creating a corporate culture for high performance and establishing a positive atmosphere with an appreciation for all members of the organization results in better organizational performance (Yejee & Moonjoo, 2022). The opposite type of culture with abusive supervision is negatively related to organizational performance and creativity (Lee, 2022; Walsh, Persky, & Pinnock, 2019). HR leaders should be fluent in corporate financial measures and frame the effects of bullying in monetary terms so the seriousness of the issue can be appreciated (Colby, 2016).

Another approach to creating corporate culture norms that run counter to bullying behavior is using Organizational Virtuousness (OV). The construct of organization virtuousness emerged from the field of positive organizational scholarship, which emphasizes characteristics and practices in organizations that focus on building on strengths and excellence (Aubouin-Bonnaventure, Fouquereau, Coillot, Lahiani, & Chevalier, 2021). Cameron, Dutton, and Quinn (2003) focused on three key definitional attributes associated with organizational virtuousness: human impact, moral goodness, and social betterment. They argue that organizations are neither virtuous nor non-virtuous, but that values and states attributed to OV are emphasized throughout the organization. Positive human impact, such as building resilience, strength, and self-control with a meaningful purpose, is virtuous. Moral goodness represents what is true, right, and worthy of development. Social betterment extends beyond self-focus and emphasizes positively impacting others in our sphere of influence. The five characteristics of OV noted by Sharma and Goyal (2022) to be the transcendent or elevating behavior of employees in organizations include:

Organizational optimism is the degree employees trust their organization so they can thrive even during challenging times.

Organizational forgiveness refers to the acceptance of mistakes and the use of setbacks or failures as a point of learning and subsequent growth.

Organizational trust focuses on governing with respect, civility, and kindness.

Organizational compassion is where leaders and people genuinely care about one another, where empathy and concern for one another are openly expressed and addressed, and.

Organizational integrity is focused on honor, integrity, and trustworthiness.

For leadership to seriously consider and employ concepts around positive organizational behavior, specifically OV, there needs to be visible financial, operational, and employee return or benefit. A study by Winn (2020) indicates that there is such a relationship. This study of OV was conducted in the transportation industry using eight independent businesses. The organizations with higher OV scores, as measured by (compassion, forgiveness, trust, optimism integrity) showed higher productivity, quality of output, profitability, customer retention, and lower turnover (Winn, 2020). Another investigation looked at a larger sample of organizations across industries, including retail, healthcare, financial, and

manufacturing, using the same OV measures. Those scoring higher in OV demonstrated higher innovation, profitability, and customer retention, and less employee turnover than those scoring lower on the OV scales. The five factors of OV consistently demonstrate a strong correlation to prosocial behavior, including work, contextual and reverse work performance, well-being, psychological safety, and employee development (Abbas, 2022). There are additional processes, presented below, that companies can use to support a positive culture. Multi-rater feedback, also called 360-degree feedback, can effectively deliver information to the bully for improved performance and can also be effective in identifying bullying issues in specific departments (Walsh, Persky, Pinnock, 2019). Multi-rater feedback includes performance feedback to an individual from supervisors, co-workers, peers, and subordinates. An advantage of multi-rater feedback processes is that participants are more comfortable sharing difficult topics knowing they are not reporting independently. This process requires the leader and the organization to hold the perpetrator accountable for their behavior (Walsh et al. 2019).

The limitation of this multi-rater feedback is in smaller departments with one or two direct reports, the individuals providing feedback may be easily identified. Exit interviews can help an organization see trends in a department or with individuals. Exit interview data may help company HR leaders spot trends or issues which can be further investigated. Another option organizations might consider is having an outside resource, such as medical insurance or an ombudsperson, available to consult with employees before issues escalate. In addition to capturing information on bullying, this resource can provide victims of bullying with a safe environment to help treat their problems. The amplification effect of positive behavior has been demonstrated consistently in research and has provided a significant focus on positive psychology and positive organizational behavior. When people observe virtuousness, they are elevated by it, so they tend to replicate it (Abbas, 2022). Positive behavior is contagious and becomes part of the organizational culture and employee practice. In organizations, this amplifying effect spreads and expands and, eventually, becomes part of the structure and culture of the firm (Cameron and Caza, 2002). The amplifying effect of OV is associated with building social capital within organizations. Trust, empathy, integrity, and compassion enable people to share information more readily, confront difficult situations more openly, and be more forgiving when missteps happen (Heaphy and Dutton, 2007). These behaviors are the antithesis of the behaviors noted by workplace bullying.

The buffering effect is also associated with OV at the individual and group levels. Human virtuousness serves as a buffer against dysfunction and illness. Virtues such as courage, optimism, faith, integrity, forgiveness, and compassion have been found to protect against psychological distress and dysfunctional behavior and enable employees to respond better to individual and organizational trauma (Seligman, Csikzentmihalyi, 2000). Organizations experiencing downsizing are both an organizational and personal trauma to those laid off. The survivors of these events in organizations with OV showed a stronger resiliency response coming out of the downsizing. Employee engagement remained relatively stable, and productivity levels returned to pre-layoff levels faster than organizations with lower levels of reported OV (Cameron, et., al, 2003).

Diagnosing Workplace Bullying

Diagnosing workplace bullying is done retroactively after the bullying occurs or proactively before the organizational signs of bullying occur. Once the bullying has occurred, individuals who feel bullied often approach a manager, executive, another employee, or human resources (HR) to discuss and resolve the issues. However, because bullying involves an imbalance of power, the bullied individual may not take action to raise the issue and instead either leave the organization or the department. It is also vital to be aware of the "bystander" effect, where witnesses to bullying behavior are negatively affected, resulting in additional turnover and a financial drain on the organization (Drey, 2022). Depending on the HR leadership, being responsive to bullying may be problematic. If the HR leader is enabled, they may institute

an investigation and take action to resolve the bullying situation. However, HR leadership may not have the backing of executive leadership to respond effectively (Gelles, 2018). HR leaders may not be seen as effective, caring, or able to do anything about bullying. Given senior leadership in organizations is commonly compensated based on the financial improvement in the organization, bullies may be kept in their position despite this behavior because they contribute to the organizational bottom line and higher compensation for senior leadership (Walsh et al. 2019). This was the case with California's Silicon Valley Community Foundation (SVCF) organization. The HR Director reported to the Executive Director, who chose not to address the bullying behavior because of the money the bully was bringing into the organization (Gelles, 2018; Walsh et al. 2019).

If reporting to executive or HR leadership is not an option, individuals may engage with an outside attorney or law enforcement individual to resolve the situation. The organization's executive leadership may only discover a bullying issue when a lawyer representing their employee contacts the company. However, given bullying is not necessarily a crime, this may not necessarily be a legal problem. An effective way to proactively diagnose bullying is by evaluating the organization to check for structural factors that allow bullies to thrive. For example, using employee surveys, organizational climate surveys, executive performance metrics, social media reviews, and training programs to spot signs of workplace bullying. Facial recognition is a new technology that can effectively determine bullying responses (Liu, Wang, Yang, Shyi & Yen, 2019). Although not widespread in organizations, it is a technique that can be useful in recognizing the physical characteristics of someone who has been bullied.

Organizations that monitor their company information on social media may find ongoing discussions about bullying on social media sites like LinkedIn, Twitter, Glassdoor.com, or other sites. By this time, the reputational damage to the company can be significant. As in the SVCF organization, the reporting in the New York Times led to upheavals, multiple resignations, and donor issues (Gelles, 2018; Walsh et al. 2019). Individuals have been known to take to social media to provide documentation using video or audio recordings to showcase bullied behavior. Bullying can be captured by a victim using a cell phone and discreetly recording the bullying. This has the advantage of capturing the incident and recording the action. This idea has limitations as the victim needs recording capability on a cell phone and the presence of mind to hit record when the bullying happens.

Instead of capturing bullying in the organization using a cell phone and recording the problem, some organizations are turning to artificial intelligence algorithms that monitor online communication. These can be installed on company computers and then used to identify online bullying. These products enable employees to collect information and report bullying in the workforce to their employers. This technology works through a computer algorithm with artificial intelligence designed to spot words and phrases associated with bullying (Griffiths, 2019; Van Hee, et. al. 2018). The technology is used in commercial applications such as "SPOT", an intelligent chatbot, and digital misconduct reporting tool, available (What is Spot?, 2022). SPOT works by interviewing employees and helping them submit reports to HR in a time-stamped interview that the employee can keep or submit to their employer. Another tool is "Botler AI" a Canadian intelligent chatbot that provides a secure and personalized first-response guide to traumatic violence, harassment, and misconduct. Botler's secure web application confidentially asks users trauma-informed questions to capture comprehensive details of the misconduct they have experienced, then provides the user with a personalized set of resources and action guidance on a per-case basis, including references to the law and referrals to legal services and information (Botler, 2022).

CONCLUSIONS

This research aimed to explore approaching the challenge of workplace bullying (WPB) from a proactive standpoint. WPB not only impacts the individuals involved, but it also negatively impacts the financial and operational effectiveness of organizations. Most research has focused on addressing this problem after it

occurred. This research proposes building workplace culture and operational practices to minimize and mitigate the behavior before it starts. This study explored the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI), and positive organizational practices, notably organizational virtuousness (OV). The theme was to identify positive workplace practices to create an organizational environment that lessens the likelihood of workplace bullying occurring, and when it does happen, to confront and address it effectively.

The unique focus of this research is to evaluate and offer proactive methods for combatting workplace bullying. The research suggests creating a high-performing culture where teamwork, creativity, risk-taking, and open problem-solving are emphasized. These elements along with a culture of virtuousness where states of empathy, compassion, forgiveness, and integrity are consciously modeled at all levels of the organization, form a positive peer pressure. These proactive approaches and known mechanisms used to confront WPB have great potential to address the problem sooner or reduce the incidences overall. This study used a combination of primary and secondary research. Primary research was conducted in the spring of 2018. Interviews were conducted with administrators, faculty, and human resource professionals. The participants were from the higher education field but represented a cross-section of private, not-for-profit, small to medium-sized institutions. Secondary sources provided material on high-performing work teams and organizational virtuousness.

The findings provide insights as to why and how bullying occurs in organizations. Participants reiterated the importance of leaders setting the tone for the organization and workplace culture. Notably, creating and reinforcing a positive-oriented workplace culture appears to discourage workplace bullying behavior and when it does occur organizations are more likely to confront and address the problematic behavior sooner. Solving the financial and operational problems associated with bullying starts with creating a high-performing organizational climate that is not conducive to bullying. Organizational virtuousness is an emerging area of research that aligns characteristics of a high-performing environment with the OV construct of behavior optimism, empathy, integrity, compassion, and forgiveness which is conducive to better financial and operational results. OV may not be the sole solution, but it offers an additional proactive strategy to complement other support mechanisms. This research indicates the power of preparation as a preventative measure against WPB. However, it is limited by the lack of empirical data evaluating the relationship between high-performing work teams or organizational virtuousness and workplace bullying. The authors acknowledge that current research shows the application of organizational virtuousness may not be enough to eliminate WPB. When WPB is entrenched in cultures, the adverse effects of this behavior can overwhelm positive organizational development and minimize efficacy. Further research should include a study on culture changes and how that affects employee behavior. The research should evaluate the role that high-performing workplace teams and OV cultures play in WPB. Additionally, combining proactive processes, such as technology and positive culture development, with OV is also worthy of future investigation.

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