



VETERINARY BUSINESS ADVISORS, INC.
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Workplace Bullying... Is It A Big Deal?

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At a company-wide meeting, a supervisor uses sarcastic humor that makes an employee's contribution seem less worthy, even though he went above and beyond on a particular project. Meanwhile, a manager "forgets" to point out a promotion opportunity to qualified employees in the hopes that a favored staff member would get the edge – while a long time employee publicly and harshly criticizes the work of an up-and-coming newer team member.

Each of these are examples of *workplace bullying*.

Bullying, as defined by the Workplace Bullying Institute, is "repeated, health-harming mistreatment" of one or multiple targets, with abusive conduct that is "threatening, humiliating, or intimidating." It can also include work interference and/or verbal abuse. The Institute's 2014 survey discovered that 27% of workers have current or past direct experience with abusive conduct at work, with bosses serving as the majority (but not the sole) source of bullying. In perhaps the most startling statistic, 72% of employers are reported as denying, discounting, encouraging, rationalizing, or defending bullying. The Institute also states that bullying is four times more common than either sexual harassment or racial discrimination at work.

For more information about bullying in the workplace, consult the Institute's website:

<http://www.workplacebullying.org/>

Another recent, albeit fairly small, study shows even more chilling results. In a VitalSmarts study of nearly 3,000 people, 96% of respondents state that they have been bullied at work: 62% of the bullying included work sabotage or reputation damage; 52% included "browbeating, threats and intimidation," while 4% even included physical assault.

Although workplace bullying is clearly inappropriate and unacceptable behavior – and may create a hostile work environment – it is not specifically prohibited by any federal or state law as discrimination is (by Title VII of the Civil Rights Act and state-level fair employment laws). The Institute cites the lack of laws prohibiting the behaviors as the reason why they are so common.

Why employees should address bullying

Even though there is no specific federal or state anti-bullying legislation in the United States, this does not mean that employers cannot be held liable when tolerating bullying in their workplace. If the offending behavior is pervasive enough to be considered threatening, intimidating or creating an environment full of hostility, there is potential for a claim of constructive discharge or intentional infliction of emotional distress. An employee could also relate the bullying to protected class discrimination.

Moreover, even if the bullying does not reach the level of illegal behavior, it is destructive to people who work at a practice – and to the practice, overall. For example, workplace bullying can result in people suffering significant emotional problems, including anxiety, depression, poor concentration, substance abuse and lowered self-esteem; physical disorders can also occur, such as gastrointestinal disorders, headaches and insomnia.

Bullying can damage the practice, as well, with increased turnover and absenteeism rates, increased health care costs, and lowered productivity and morale. Retaliation may ratchet up in levels of aggression, even to the point of violent behavior. Above all, tolerating workplace bullying makes it impossible for employers to reach the goal of treating all employees with respect and dignity.

So, the questions are:

- What is – and what is not – bullying behavior?
- How should bullying be defined?
- How should employees respond to bullying behaviors?
- How should managers respond to bullying behaviors?

What is – and what is not – bullying behavior?

Overall, bullying at work often involves:

- Demeaning employees through intimidation and/or not giving them the credit they deserve
- Creating impossible-to-meet demands, including unreasonable deadlines, and/or regularly assigning more work than can reasonably be accomplished in a time period
- Limiting the amount of relevant information provided to employees and/or interfering with appropriate interaction among them

Not all bullies use the same tactics. Some may yell, while others may never raise their voices. Some may make demeaning statements directly to employees, while others resort to behind-the-back criticisms and insults. Some may be aggressive; others, passive aggressive, “forgetting” to respond to important emails, to provide needed supplies and the like, or by putting down an employee and then claiming that it was just a joke. What they have in common is that they repeatedly use inappropriate bullying tactics in how they relate to others in the workplace. A more recent addition is cyber-bullying, which can include humiliating and/or intimidating emails, text messages and/or social media postings.

Meanwhile, respectfully providing feedback and/or sharing honest differences of opinion is not considered workplace bullying, even when that involves making legitimate complaints in a professional manner. Moreover, supervisors and managers need to give feedback about job duties and deadlines; provide performance evaluations; discipline employees; and announce

layoffs, promotions and the like – and, when done in a respectful manner, these actions do not constitute bullying, even if an employee does not like what is being communicated.

How should bullying be defined?

Each practice should create an anti-bullying policy, one that is communicated to the entire staff, included in the employee manual, and reviewed each year. This policy must specifically define bullying, along with listing unacceptable behaviors; resources to use to create policies include the Workplace Bullying Institute and the Society of Human Resource Management (policy samples found at <http://www.shrm.org/templatestools/samples>). Policies must include methods for reporting bullying behaviors (with alternate methods in case the bully ends up being the person listed as the reporting contact!) and practices must determine and share investigation processes to resolve complaints.

To gain buy-in, consider having employees – or at least a representative group of them – help to form the policy. This will most likely help a practice to create a more universal policy and may help to identify people who might resent any clampdown on bullying behaviors.

Practice owners and managers must also take an open and honest look at their own management styles. Could any of their behaviors be construed as bullying? If so, then training in more effective management techniques may be in order.

How should employees respond to bullying behaviors?

They should:

- Not engage in any workplace bullying or harassment, including gossiping
- Document details of bullying (including dates and witnesses)
- Stay calm and not retaliate
- Tell the bully – IF it feels safe to do so – to stop inappropriate behaviors, specifically naming those behaviors
- Report unresolved bullying and harassment through appropriate channels

How should managers respond to bullying behaviors?

Practice owners and managers must take all claims seriously. They must investigate the claims and take firm corrective action whenever bullying behaviors are confirmed. Discipline can go as far as termination. It is not enough, however, to simply wait for complaints to be made. It's crucial that owners/managers also regularly train employees, including supervisors, on the practice's anti-bullying policies. If a certain department has higher-than-normal turnover, bullying may be playing a role and must be carefully observed, with inappropriate behaviors swiftly addressed.