

# The Leader - Post (Regina, Saskatchewan)

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## More and More Workplaces have Bullies

Bullying that can leave employees working in “toxic” conditions is unfortunately becoming all too common, says a University of Regina administration professor.

Celeste Brotheridge co-authored a study in 2001 which found that 40 per cent of 180 respondents employed in the private and public sector in southern Saskatchewan – primarily Regina – reported experiencing one or more forms of bullying at least once a week in the past six months. Ten per cent said they experienced five or more forms of bullying a week.

“The results make you wonder what’s going on in our workplaces, especially since most bullies tend to be the supervisors of employees,” says Brotheridge, adding the results surprisingly suggest two out of five employees will be victims. And people tend to under-report negative behaviours.

“If you just saw one incident, you would think that’s pretty normal ... But they accumulate,” notes Brotheridge. “They’re really a pattern of negative acts directed at an individual employee that persist over time.”

And “given bullying’s deleterious effects on employee health, it is reason for concern,” she adds.

Marilyn Noble, co-chairwoman of a research team on workplace violence and abuse at the University of New Brunswick, says a simple definition of bullying is elusive but that doesn’t make it unrecognizable. “It can take so many different forms. It generally involves an abuse of power.”

She admits there’s a fine line between bullying and managing. “Managers have a responsibility to manage and to get appropriate productivity out of people, but there are ways of doing that. When it becomes a question of shaming people, embarrassing people, holding them up to ridicule, just constantly being on their case for no apparent reason, then it is becoming unreasonable.”

The abuse can range from supervisors with “explosive personalities” to subordinates who hide reports or withhold urgent phone messages. The behaviours that experts flag include talking down to another person, ignoring an employee’s contributions, excluding people, putting undue pressure on someone, setting people up to fail, verbal abuse, and outright violence.

“A bully often acts by isolating an individual. And they may be a serial bully, who always has a victim on the go. They may, in fact, have multiple victims on the go, but their strategy is to isolate them from one another,” says Noble.

While it can certainly seem deliberate to the victim, the bully may be unaware of the harm. “They may not see the pattern of behaviour themselves or they may think that it’s OK to undermine someone in a certain way because that’s the way they’ve been taught to manage others,” says Brotheridge.

Noble points out that the problem can be more systemic than one or two abusive managers. “In the current climate of economic competitiveness, there is an incredible amount of pressure to squeeze more and more productivity out of fewer and fewer employees. And in that climate, the reigning ethos is that you manage by control and coercion.”

Al Walker, executive director of Saskatchewan Occupational Health and Safety, says prevention is extremely important. “You don’t want things to escalate. If people are aware that this is unwanted behaviour, that if there’s even early signs of it, there is somebody to go to or some way to nip it in the bud,” he advises.

“One of the difficulties is once it gets to us, or an external regulator, you have what you call a poisoned workplace. It’s very hard to turn back the clock then.”

So how do you “nip it in the bud”?

Employers should have anti-bullying policies and hire and promote effective managers, says Brotheridge. She notes some businesses actually have a “no asshole rule” to avoid hiring competent, but narcissistic or Machiavellian managers.

In addition, top managers should be aware of what is happening and heed employees concerns. Brotheridge recognizes that, realistically, senior managers can be left out of the “loop.”

“What bullies tend to do is they establish really good relationships with certain people so that those people cannot see or cannot understand that other people are being treated in such a different fashion. And it takes quite a long time ... and quite a number of victims for them to appreciate that this is indeed happening.”

Noble says it’s important, especially at the early stages, to speak to the bully about his behaviour. She favours trained intervenors at every level of an organization.

Noble can’t fathom why an employer would ignore the problem. “It’s bad for productivity. It’s bad for morale. You end up with people on sick leave, and stress leave and long-term disability. You get absenteeism. You get staff turnover.”

According to the Saskatchewan Workers’ Compensation Board, it has paid out \$3.6 million over the past five years for work-related chronic stress, which doesn’t exclusively include bullying or harassment situations. (On average, only a third of the stress claims made are accepted.)

For the bullied employee, Noble says it's critical to document everything – save voice mail, e-mail or written messages – and don't keep the material at your office. Find witnesses willing to verify what occurred, but be careful they won't go back to the bully.

She adds that bystanders also wield power. "You're making your support clear, and you're putting the bully on notice that you're watching."

Some experts suggest the employee bullied by a supervisor take concerns two levels above that person. "If your immediate supervisor is the problem, the person immediately above him probably had a hand in hiring him. So they're going to be not pre-disposed to hear that he's screwed up because it makes them look bad too," Noble says.

Walker is encouraged by what he sees as a push to eliminate bullying through awareness. "The respectful workplace is almost like a movement," he says.

"This is anti-social behaviour that should not be condoned – this bullying – and it takes lots of forms and we can only legislate so much of it," Walker adds.

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