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Workplace bullying: Is lack of understanding the reason for inaction?



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At what point is the line crossed between a series of humorous work pranks and workplace bullying? This question is actually more complex than it looks. Take the very well publicized office complaint case of David Thorne and Simon Dempsey—a story that has taken social media sites and the wider Internet by storm over the last couple of years. Although it has now been revealed that the interactions between Thorne and Dempsey are somewhat fictitious (loosely based on actual interactions between the author and a previous coworker), the behaviors and their ensuing complaints provide a lens from which this question can be considered.

In this case, Dempsey makes ten formal complaints in six months all relating to the behavior of his work colleague Thorne. The complaints allege that Thorne:

1. Opened a package addressed to Dempsey which contained a T-shirt and replaced it with a pair of socks;
2. Stole Dempsey's lunch from the fridge and replaced it with a single pickle;
3. Changed the title of Dempsey's business cards to Horse Whisper;
4. Accessed Dempsey's computer and photo-shopped Justin Bieber's head onto photographs in his personal album;
5. Impersonated Dempsey on the telephone, telling an important customer that he couldn't get a job done because he "needed to take a nap."
6. Painted Dempsey's iPhone white with liquid paper;
7. Moved Dempsey's desk and personal belongings to the kitchen;
8. Accessed his computer in order to change preset hot keys and web pages;
9. Defaced a poster that Dempsey had behind his desk;
10. Sent an e-mail request from another worker's computer, resulting in Dempsey paying for fictitious company-managed swimming lessons.

BUT IS IT WORKPLACE BULLYING?

When viewed in isolation, each of the acts seem fairly innocuous and actually quite humorous, however are these behaviors workplace bullying? When examining the range of comments that have been posted online in response to this case, there seems to be a blurring as to the answer to this question. Some hold Thorne up on a pedestal hailing him as "the world's most brilliantly obnoxious coworker," calling him "heroic" and "legendary." Others however, do not agree and identify Thorne as a "jerk" and a "bully." Dempsey does not fare well either. Comments such as "Simon needs to grow a pair," "I really think he has it coming," "what a whinge bag," and "he deserved every bit of being trolled" demonstrate how many perceive Dempsey as being the problem.

A further topic of discussion that divides Internet commentators in this case is the appropriateness of the behaviors Thorne subjected Dempsey to. Some believe the behaviors are inappropriate, posting comments such as "Eventually the good employee will leave and the company will have to deal with the office bully. The lack of discipline on the bully makes this a hostile work environment"; "poison"; and "David is a bully from what I can see" to those that believe the behaviors simply constitute funny work pranks, noting, "It's amusing to me that people use words like 'bully.' This is piss taking all the way!"

While Thorne and Dempsey's interactions are only loosely based on actual events, many of us may have seen or heard of similar behaviors occurring in our own workplaces. Indeed, the recent and high profile case of bullying in the NFL (National Football League) has also undoubtedly raised questions as to what constitutes workplace bullying? In this case, a young player from the Miami Dolphins football team (Jonathan Martin) was systematically targeted by several other players for over a year. Martin was constantly subjected

to racial and homophobic slurs, called a “bitch” for the entire season by another player, and subjected to sexually graphic language and gestures toward his sister (whom the perpetrators incidentally had never met) and mother. These insults came in the form of verbal and physical abuse as well as text messages sent to his cell phone. By the end of October 2013, Martin could take no more and vowed to leave the club if he was subjected to any further bullying behavior (by this time he had been prescribed antidepressants by a psychiatrist and his mental wellbeing was jeopardized). But the abuse did not stop. On the contrary, Martin continued to be relentlessly mocked. Then on the evening of October 28, after being told he was not welcome to join his teammates for dinner and having his meal tray thrown to the floor when he tried, Martin checked himself into hospital for psychiatric treatment. NFL-appointed investigator Ted Wells later found that three team members had engaged in harassment of their fellow players for more than a year.

What both cases demonstrate is that there is no clear consensus as to where the line is crossed between workplace banter (or team comradery) and workplace bullying. Furthermore, many individuals do not think that workplace bullying is something that could happen in today’s organization, let alone in a football club. Take for example the comments of Marshall Faulk (Pro Football Hall of Famer—Class of 2011; 2000 NFL MVP) on the NFL “GameDay Morning” show (Culture of NFL locker rooms) on the 3rd of November 2013, who stated:

I just didn’t think [an] adult could be bullied by another adult—I just felt like that was a kid thing.

As researchers, we are not surprised at this. In our own research, we have found that many individuals do not understand what workplace bullying is—especially when they have never been subjected to bullying. Importantly, they also do not know what it is not. In this article we attempt to provide some clarity on this topic for managers and workers in the hope that it will raise awareness and spur action to prevent more cases such as Dempsey and Martins’ from occurring.

WORKPLACE BULLYING AND ITS EFFECTS

Research released in 2014 estimates that approximately 27 percent of the U.S. workforce has been (20 percent) or are being (7 percent) subjected to workplace bullying. A further 21 percent of workers report they have witnessed it. When combined, these figures suggest that almost half the U.S. workforce has had some experience with bullying in the workplace. Whatever term you use—bullying, mobbing, emotional abuse, workplace incivility, employee abuse, general harassment—being subjected to this type of behavior can have a devastating effect on those who are targeted, not to mention the flow-on effect for bystanders (affected in many cases as much as the target) and the work environment in general.

INDIVIDUAL EFFECTS

Over 20 years of research has consistently demonstrated the severe, long-term negative effects of workplace bullying on these three groups. For Dempsey and Martin the short-term

effects could have included increased anxiety and panic attacks, and a reduction in self-esteem, attendance at work, productivity and overall wellbeing. Long-term effects comprise stress related symptoms similar to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and in more extreme cases suicide. Indeed, Martin was affected so badly that he was prescribed anti-depressants, required psychiatric assistance, and twice contemplated suicide. Negative outcomes for bystanders (witnesses) include fear of being the next target (would you want to be the next Dempsey or Martin?), guilt and shame for not wanting to get involved in the conflict, or more generally they are affected because they have to work in what can become a very toxic environment.

ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTS

Naturally, these negative effects also lead to substantial organizational costs. Absenteeism from work due to stress and anxiety and poor productivity is not uncommon. Reduced job satisfaction and higher intention to leave are well-documented consequences. Furthermore, there is the cost of relocating or retraining when individuals transfer to another team or leave the organization all together (commonly targets leave). Indeed, estimates from around the world repeatedly find that the financial costs of bullying to business are substantial (up to \$100,000 per annum for each bullied individual). Workplace bullying therefore deserves our understanding, attention and action.

WORKPLACE BULLYING—WHAT IT IS AND WHAT IT IS NOT

Still the question remains—what is workplace bullying? Can the interaction between Thorne and Dempsey be classed as workplace bullying? Was there a point where the taunts that Martin was subjected to turned from locker-room antics to bullying? Take some time to think about what you would consider to be bullying in the workplace and if YOU perceive what happened to Dempsey and Martin was bullying?

From an academic perspective, workplace bullying occurs when an individual experiences a number of negative behaviors repeatedly over a period of time (a pattern of similar or different behaviors over a period of about six months). Commonly, a single episode of negative behavior is not considered to be bullying unless that singular action results in continuing ramifications or ongoing threat for the target.

Also important when defining workplace bullying is the presence of a power imbalance, that is, one party is at a disadvantage or unable to protect or shield themselves from the bullying. However, when two (or more) individuals are experiencing an ongoing conflict and all parties feel they have an equal power base in the conflict—then this is not bullying. It is important to note that a power imbalance can develop over time and be a direct reaction to the persistent inappropriate behavior of the alleged perpetrator. The case of Martin is a clear example of this.

To illustrate this point, we use the analogy of an empty backpack. Imagine that you are wearing an empty pack on your back. It’s very light and easily carried for a very long time. Now imagine a little bit of weight (an insult, a practical joke, or criticism of your work) is added to your pack—still not a real

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