AC 2009-781: WORKPLACE BULLIES: A RISING WORKPLACE CONCERN AND DETRIMENT TO CAREER SUCCESS

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Workplace Bullies: A Rising Workplace Concern and Detriment to Career Success

Abstract

As engineering and technology students enter the workforce to begin their careers, they will encounter several obstacles to their future professional success. In addition to having to deal with career issues related to global competition and technological change, an additional concern students are likely to encounter is workplace bullying. During internships or as newly hired employees, students and graduates will eventually discover that career success is not solely dependent on technical competent, but on socialization factors, including the ability to effectively deal with workplace bullies.

Although bullying behavior is a common problem for many students at the primary and secondary educational levels, it has also become a major concern in the workplace. Every year, the number of employees being harassed by co-workers and supervisors has grown with detrimental effects on the organization and the career success of victimized employees. The constant, unprofessional and offensive behavior of workplace bullies can range from insensitive comments and inappropriate behavior to threats and physical violence. In addition to the psychological and sometimes physical effects harassed employees may experience, there are also organizational problems associated with this unacceptable behavior. Poor performance, low employee morale, job dissatisfaction, absenteeism, turnover and complaints of discrimination are just a few of the organizational effects associated with bullying behavior. The negative consequences resulting from workplace bullies have created the need for the faculty to make students aware of this problem and help them develop strategies to address this growing industry concern.

This paper will describe how engineering and technology faculty can help prepare students to cope with bullies in the 21st century workplace. The paper will focus on helping students become aware of the problem and strategies they can use to overcome offensive co-workers. Also, as future leaders of business organizations, the paper will help to prepare students for managerial positions by providing an understanding on how to address workplace bullying.

Introduction

Today's workplace is filled with many career obstacles, some obvious and others obscure. Workplace bullies are a raising concern that students need to be aware of, along with how to deal with them[1]. Although many engineering and technology programs do an excellent job of preparing their students for the technical aspects of their professions, an area that is not adequately covered is how to deal with workplace bullies. Not only is this a concern for engineering and technology students, it's a problem for graduates of every

academic program. Workplace bullies can adversely impact an employee's career, along with the success of the organization[12].

For decades, many employees have been subjected to a constant barrage of insensitive and inappropriate behaviors by workplace bullies causing unnecessary and unreasonable humiliation, embarrassment and emotional distress. Because of the detrimental effects of bullying behavior, it's important for faculty in all academic programs to create awareness and discuss strategies to help students deal with this workplace concern.

Engineering and Technology Students

Traditionally, bullying behavior was frequently associated with behaviors occurring in elementary, middle and high school educational levels. In the workplace, any perception of inappropriate or bullying behavior was often thought of as a personal concern that should be dealt with in private by the employees involved. However, due to its prevalence and detrimental effects on employees and the organization itself, it's a subject that university faculty need to discuss with their students.

It's important for engineering and technology faculty to provide students, not only with the technical knowledge and skills required for success in the workplace, but the skills to deal with workplace bullies. Because of their age, and lack of work and life experiences, younger employees are particularly susceptible to the negative effects of workplace bullies and less likely to know how to deal with them[14]. Nevertheless, the effects of bullies can have long term and adverse consequences on the self esteem, work performance and overall careers of victimized employees[13].

Additionally, because many engineering and technology students will eventually assume leadership roles with their prospective employers, it's important for these students to be aware of the effects of bullying behavior and strategies for addressing it.

Workplace Bullying

According to the Workplace Bullying Institute, the degree of bullying in the workplace is a growing phenomenon. Table 1 lists the prevalence of workplace bullying[2].

Table 1: Prevalence of workplace bullying

37 percent of American workers have experienced workplace bullying
12 percent of American workers have witnessed workplace bullying
24 percent of companies said workplace bullying had occurred within the past year
62 percent of the time management was made aware of the problem, it did nothing or made the situation worse when informed of workplace bullying
45 percent of bullied victims stated that their lives were stressed as a result of workplace bullying

According to a recent Times Newspaper article[3], "Coping with Bullies in the Workplace:"

- More than one of three workers report being bullied at work (54 million workers)
- Nearly three-quarters of the bullies are in managerial positions
- 55% of victims of managerial bullies are workers

Problems Associated with Bullies

Workplace bullies can create problems, not only for the victimized employees, but for the entire organization. Table 2 identifies some of the problems associated with bullying behavior for the individual employee[1, 4].

Table 2: Effects of workplace bullying on the individual employee

• Poor performance
• Low self esteem
• Desire for retaliation
• Violence
• Job dissatisfaction
• Low morale
• Turnover
• Increased absenteeism

When considering the effects on the organization, the impact of bullying behavior can be more detrimental. Table 3 identifies some of the problems associated with bullying for the organization[4].

Table 3: Organizational effects of workplace bullying

• Lost productivity
• Hostile work environment
• Claims of harassment
• Costs and time involved for investigating complaints
• Costs associated with turnover (recruiting and training replacements)
• Poor customers relations due to poor employee performance
• Loss of organizational goodwill and reputation
• Increased absenteeism

Define Bullying Behavior

To prevent or reduce workplace bullying, it's important to understand what is meant by bullying[5]. As is true when defining any behavior or group of behaviors, there are various degrees of bullying, ranging from inappropriate comments to physical violence[11].

According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, bullying is defined as "repeated intimidation, slandering, social isolation or humiliation by one or more persons against another[6]."

Other definitions of bullying can include: "derogatory remarks, insults, and epithets that a reasonable person would find threatening, intimidating or humiliating[2]." Table 4 identifies some of the major warning signs of bullying behavior[3].

Table 4: Major warning signs of bullying behavior

• Overreaction to situations
• Micromanaging others
• Acting in a superior and condescending way
• Humiliating employees in front of colleagues
• Taking a threatening stance

Strategies for Dealing with Workplace Bullies

No longer considered to be a minor nuisance that must be tolerated in the workplace, many organizations are searching for strategies to address the situation. Due to the varying degrees and types of behavior that are involved in bullying, it's important that several remedies be available for victimized employees to pursue.

1. Individual Strategies for Dealing with Bullies

Recognizing the negative effects that bullying can have on victimized employees, it's important that individual strategies be available to employees when dealing with inappropriate behavior. Table 5 identifies strategies that individual employees can use when confronted with bullying behavior[4, 7].

Table 5: Individual strategies for dealing with bullies

• Before implementing anti-bully strategies, employees need to reexamine their attitudes about working with different people and personalities. Employees need to be aware that some amount of interpersonal conflict is normal and therefore, must exercise understanding and reasonable tolerance with their co-workers
• If bullying behavior occurs, employees need to become aware of their workplace rights, including any company policies and laws that may cover bullying
• Employees need to document any incidences of bullying, including dates, times, and possible witnesses to specific incidences of inappropriate behavior
• Employees need to learn to be assertive when confronting bullying incidences

• Employees should investigate whether any assistance is available to help them deal with bullies, including talking to their immediate supervisor, human resources department or experienced employees about the problem

2. Strategies Leaders Can Use to Minimize Bullies

Supervisors, managers and others in leadership positions may be able to limit bullying behaviors and offer assistance to victimized employees. Table 6 identifies what leaders can do to minimize bullying behavior[7].

Table 6: What leaders can do to minimize bullying behavior

• Leaders can use their influence to minimize bullying behavior by acting as positive role models and raising the issue with employees during department meetings
• Leaders can help to create a positive work and social culture that encourages mutual respect among employees
• Leaders need to be aware of employee interactions, including warning signs of bullying behaviors
• Leaders can implement an anti-bullying policy within their areas of supervision

3. Organizational Strategies for Dealing with Bullies

From an organizational standpoint, there are several things that the organization can do to limit and help employees deal with workplace bullies. Table 7 identifies organizational strategies for dealing with bullies[8, 10].

Table 7: Organizational strategies for dealing with bullies

• Companies need to avoid hiring employees who have documented histories of interpersonal problems, including those with bullying tendencies. It's important for human resource personnel to do a good job of checking references and asking applicants questions concerning teamwork, cooperation and the ability to effectively interact with others
• Companies need to develop specific anti-bullying workplace policies, similar to antidiscrimination and harassment policies
• If a company already has an anti-harassment policy and doesn't want to add another policy, anti-bullying can be incorporated in the company's existing anti-harassment policy
• Companies need to provide training for supervisors and employees about workplace bullying, including the effects of bullying on the individual employee and the organization. Additional training might include the legal implications of bullying behavior, assertiveness training, and developing communication skills and teamwork

• Companies need to survey employees and collect data about the current organizational culture, including questions about bullying incidences within the organization
• Companies need to evaluation and reward supervisors on their ability to establish a departmental culture that promotes mutual respect and thereby, minimizes bullying behavior

4. Legal Remedies

In addition to individual, leadership and organizational strategies for dealing with workplace bullying, it's important that the legal issues associated with this inappropriate behavior be discussed.

a. Bullying behavior may rise to the level of employment discrimination. Bullied employees may be able to file complaints of harassment under anti-harassment laws, such as Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act or similar state laws[9]. Title VII of the 1964 Civil Right Acts and similar state anti-discrimination laws prohibit employment discrimination based on race, color, national origin, religion and gender.

b. Although there are no specific anti-bullying laws, several states are considering the introduction of legislation specifically dealing with workplace bullying.

c. Bullying behavior may also be a violation of the Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA)[6]. The OSHA "general duty section" requires that employers maintain a work environment free of known hazards. Harassing, intimidating and the violent behavior of bullies may rise to the level of an OSHA violation.

d. Civil lawsuits are another remedy available for employees who feel victimized by bullying co-workers or bosses. Lawsuits for personal injury based on infliction of emotional distress, humiliation, and assault and battery may be filed.

e. Depending on the severity of the bullying behavior, such as those involving violence and threats, criminal prosecution may result.

The Role of University Faculty

In addition to providing students with the technical skills for their respective fields of study, engineering and technology faculty can play a major role in helping to prepare students to deal with bullying behavior. Awareness by the faculty and students of the existence of workplace bullies is the first step in developing strategies for minimizing bullying behavior and its detrimental effects.

Faculty need to become familiar with the issue of workplace bullies and creative in identifying opportunities to incorporate a discussion of the problem into their courses. Fortunately, there are many occasions where faculty can raise the topic of workplace bullying. For example, bullying behavior can be raised with various class assignments or

discussions involving aspects of leadership, teamwork, safety management, organizational communications, employee training and related topics involving employee interactions. Some specific examples for incorporating the discussion of bullying behavior are identified.

1. Leadership Roles: Faculty can discuss bullying behavior during any discussion about the different leadership roles students will assume in the corporate world while working on various projects. When discussing the future leadership roles engineering and technology students will assume during their careers, faculty can help to make students aware of workplace bullying and its effects on employees and the organization.

2. Teamwork Assignments: When students are given assignments that involve aspects of teamwork, the instructor can use the opportunity to discuss examples of inappropriate team member behavior, such as bullying, harassment and other types of insensitive behavior. The instructor can connect those inappropriate behaviors to possible workplace situations.

3. Other opportunities for faculty to raise the issue and discuss bullying in the workplace may include the following:

- During the course introduction, instructors can raise the issue of workplace bullying when discussing inappropriate classroom behavior, the university's civility and/or harassment policy.
- While discussing career opportunities and other work related concerns, instructors can invite guest speakers to discuss workplace bullying.
- Instructors can require student research assignments and presentations on work related concerns and/or career obstacles, including workplace bullying.
- Experiential learning has become an important agenda in academia. Therefore, instructors can incorporate a discussion of workplace bullying as an experiential course assignment. Faculty can use that opportunity to discuss workplace bullying as examples of real life, work-related experiences.
- The instructor can incorporate multidisciplinary learning into their technical courses and help students learn about other career related concerns. For example, the instructor can develop a "current topic assignment" where students are required to research or discuss a non-technical topic related to their careers. When discussing the non-technical topic, the instructor can include the topic of workplace bullying.

Conclusion

As graduating students begin their careers in today's workplace they will soon discover that career success is not solely dependent on technical competent. Other factors may affect their success, including the ability to effectively deal with workplace bullies. Workplace bullying is an often overlooked subject area in most engineering and technology courses. However, to be successful, it's important for students to be aware of and learn how to deal with workplace bullying. Due to its potential to detrimentally affect

the careers of employees, workplace bullying is an important topic that needs to be discussed and addressed.

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