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Dr. Steve's Monthly Newsletter

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The Office Bully

*Whether it's a boss
or an employee, it's
bad for business.*



Articles on bullying at
work abound these days.

What has always been a schoolyard problem (especially for me, as a thin and bookish child) has crossed over to the office, the factory, the job site, the restaurant, and the retail store. Wherever employees gather to work and communicate, we see the growing emergence of a set of behaviors that can create fear, anxiety, stress, and even injuries. The usual perception of workplace bullying is the angry and belittling boss, often a male, who throws his physical and symbolic weight around to leverage his authority over scared employees. The bigger truth is that office bullies can be company owners and partners, senior executives, line managers, supervisors, or other frontline employees. One recent study, however anecdotal, suggests that female supervisors make some of the worst office bullies, mistaking assertiveness for aggression as they make outrageous demands or mistreat their staffs. We want all bosses to be firm, fair, and consistent and when they aren't, who can help? Certainly the Human Resources office,

legal counsel, business owners or partners, Board of Directors, senior management, or even any supervisor can and should step in when bullying impacts the morale of one or more employees and the bottom line of the company. But workplace bullying has a shadowy component to it. What some employees see as a tough boss, others see as a bully. And since bullying can be person-specific, some people are targets while others are not. Bullying can be verbal and/or physical. So if any employee, at any level, grabs, pushes, or threatens another employee, we may have crossed over into a criminal act. This issue raises lots of questions, and what makes it even more complex is that many senior business people don't even like to admit that it may be occurring in their facilities. "Some of our employees are just too sensitive," they say, or, "We don't need a 'champion employee' around here, seeing injustice and mistreatment everywhere he or she looks." Or, "If people complain about a bully, then do we have a potential for a 'hostile work environment' claim?" There is a fair amount of denial, rationalization, and even tacit acceptance of this issue, which is troubling, as in, "Yeah, Dave's the office bully, but he sure can sell our products and the customers love him" or "She's a bully for sure, but we need her project management skills when it's crunch time." My colleague Catherine Mattice has written ***Back Off! Your Kick-Ass Guide to Ending Bullying at Work***, published by Infinity Publishing. She notes, "While we've all experienced some of these behaviors at some point at work, they become bullying when they occur frequently. Bullying is not a one-time event; it's on-going abuse that occurs several times a day or week, becomes more and more aggressive over time, and usually lasts around two years before there is any solution or relief." Your company policies should address bullying as a behavior that hurts the workplace and relationships, and is subject to discipline or termination. No one wants to work in an office or for a boss or co-worker who makes them feel afraid.

Ask Dr. Steve

*"Dear Dr. Steve,
How do we prove our
training programs are
working?"*



If employees go through so-called “hard-skills”

training classes, it’s usually easy to verify that what they were taught worked. This includes classes on using software, equipment, or machinery. With soft-skills topics – behavior-based or compliance programs – it’s tougher. How do you prove your sexual harassment awareness and prevention program worked? One possible measure is the absence of the problem; no complaints, no investigations. But does that mean the problem is not an issue or that some employees are still fearful about reporting it no matter how many times we tell them of their obligation? Since I teach workplace violence prevention, I take no small amount of pride in the obvious fact that no one has been injured or killed in the weeks, months, and years after I did my sessions. I also measure my success with this training topic in several ways: I take the group through a post-test; I give quick quizzes throughout; I use a lot of open-ended questions to get their answers; I remind them of the concepts and new vocabulary frequently; and I often give them a cheat sheet, which is a summary of the slides. I ask the management who brought me in to remind the employees about the concepts during staff meetings, all-hands e-mails, and in coaching sessions. The return on your training investment dollar is both critical and hard to measure. Both the trainer and the organization share the responsibility to see that training sticks, the concepts are applied, and the participants show changes in their behavior or performance.

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