

Workplace Bullying

Workplace Bullying Defined

Thousands of NYSUT members are expected to model good behavior for students. They are trained to be on the alert to spot bullying against students and help to end the behavior by working with the bully and supporting the victim. How about the bullied worker? In a 2014 study, more than 27 percent of Americans say they have been, or are being, bullied at work. Most say that their employers ignore the problem.

The bully can be a supervisor, administrator or coworker. Their bullying behavior is easy to recognize. While a tough, demanding boss who wants to get the best performance out of workers is not a bully, the following behaviors do indicate a bully at work:

- Repeated behavior that intimidates, degrades, humiliates or offends a person, often in front of others
- Singling out a worker(s) for constant criticism with no concrete or positive guidance and support for changing the alleged shortcoming
- Targeting someone with practical jokes
- Exclusion or social isolation of an employee
- Excessive monitoring
- Giving assignments with unrealistic or impossible deadlines
- Sabotaging and undermining work such as withholding information and resources needed for the job
- Gossip, rumors and misinformation

This bullying behavior can also happen by mobile phone, email or over the Internet (workplace cyberbullying).

If you regularly feel intimidated or dread being around a coworker or supervisor who constantly yells at, insults, and puts you down; or that individual talks over you at meetings, criticizes you, or steals credit for your work, you are a victim of workplace bullying.



Health Effects of Bullying

Some organizational effects of workplace bullying may be self-obvious, like increased staff turnover and absenteeism and loss of job satisfaction, productivity and creativity.

For workers, the consequences of workplace bullying can be devastating. Some studies have shown that bullied workers exhibit symptoms similar to those of soldiers returning from combat. Too often bullied workers end up leaving their jobs involuntarily because the situation is so demoralizing and stressful.

If not addressed soon, bullied workers can experience serious health consequences such as:

- Post-traumatic stress disorder
- Reduced self-esteem

- Musculoskeletal problems
- Sleep disturbance
- Depression
- Digestive problems
- Phobias
- Anxiety disorder

Witnesses to bullying also suffer. In addition to being emotionally distressed, witnesses are also more likely to want resign their jobs and may start to view their employers as being unethical and unsupportive. If their coworker is bullied with impunity, what's to stop them from being bullied in the future?



What rights do you have?

Federal and state laws

- Federal and state laws protect against discrimination related to sexual harassment or racial, age or other protected class discrimination. Protected classes in employment in New York are: race/color, creed (religion), national origin, sex, marital status, disability, HIV/AIDS or Hepatitis C status, sexual orientation/gender identity, and honorably discharged veteran and military status.



- Protected class harassment laws offer no protection against 'status blind' (not related to being a protected class) workplace bullying.
- For public employees in New York, excluding pre-k-12 school employees, the Workplace Violence Prevention regulation has some protection against verbal abuse. However, much of what constitutes workplace bullying doesn't rise to the law's definition of violence. If you're not sure, talk to your local union rep or call your area PESH office (NYS Dept. of Labor Public Employee Safety and Health).

Employer policies

- Check to see if your employer either has a specific policy against bullying at work or if there are other related policies for conduct, behavior, harassment and/or respect.
- Good employer policies should include a statement on the purpose of the policy, definition of bullying behaviors, employee rights and responsibilities, complaint procedures, no retaliation for reporting, education of the workforce on bullying and remedies for bullied workers.

Contract language

- See if your contract has any language references to positive work environments or if you can file grievances on violations of employer policies.
- Negotiating language into the collective bargaining agreement is an important way to give workers protection against bullies. There are many examples of effective language from around the country. Local leaders can talk to the union labor relations specialist about developing proposed language.
- Issues to consider for contract language are similar to employer policy recommendations and include: definition of workplace bullying, prohibition of inappropriate forms of communication, stated expectations of how workers and supervisors should treat each other and how

reports of bullying are reported and investigated. Contracts may also identify disciplinary action against bullies.



What Can You Do?

- If you are being bullied, it's important to speak up as soon as possible. Tell a union rep and trusted coworkers. Tell someone from management as soon as possible.
- Document the bullying behavior. The number, patterns and regularity of the behavior reveal bullying so document what is done, and where and when it happens. If there are witnesses, write down who they are and ask them if they would be willing to give a written statement. Keep track of any efforts to address the problem.
- If you believe you have bullying-related health problems, talk to your physician and/or to an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) representative for additional advice.



If you are a witness to bullying

Witnesses to bullying may feel they are unable to stop the mistreatment of their coworker, or are afraid they could become the target of the bully should they speak up. But witnesses also may feel compelled to speak up and try to help stop the damage the bully is inflicting. To have the best chance of a positive impact, consider the following actions:

- Write down the details of the mistreatment soon after you witness it.
- Don't wait until you see a large number of infractions before recording your observations. It will be harder to recall all the specific incidents if you wait for a long-standing pattern.
- Keep emails that include evidence of bullying.
- When you are copied on a mean-spirited email, commonly called a 'nasty gram', it may be tempting to immediately delete it. Instead, create an email folder for such correspondence and save the "nasty gram" to that folder. You never know when you, or the target, may need such evidence.
- Reach out to the target privately.
- Even if you don't know the target well, stopping by her office and giving her your vote of confidence means a lot. Give the target positive feedback and let him know you are there to support him if and when he needs it. It may be the support your coworker needs to confront the bully, or to take steps to stop the behavior.
- Support the target in group settings.
- You may not want to challenge a bully for fear he or she will turn on you, but there are subtle ways to support the target when you feel she is being unjustly criticized or attacked. You can always lend your support by saying, "I support the work Tom has done," or "I believe Jana is on the right path here." And then give your reasons why.



- Share what you know with Human Resources when you see a pattern of bullying.

Targets of bullying are often afraid to speak up, and when they do, their complaints may be disregarded by a manager. As an independent third party, you may be in a better position to provide an objective account of the negative behavior. If a manager disregards the bullying activity, it may be time to go to HR.

- Take care of yourself.

It can be easy to discount the impact of a toxic work environment if you are not the target of hostility, but even witnessing bullying can impact your wellbeing. Don't forget about your own self-care needs, which may include exercise, healthy food, and positive relationships with people outside the workplace.

Source: Heidi Reeder Ph.D., "The Witness: 6 Steps to Take if You See Workplace Bullying," Psychology Today, Aug 13, 2014

How The Union Can Help

As a member of the union, you can access resources to help deal with a workplace bully. Don't suffer in silence — you have a right to dignity and respect at work. You are also probably not alone in being bullied.

Contact your union about what is happening. If it can be avoided, an employee shouldn't be alone with a bully or confront him about his behavior. If the bully is a supervisor, the union building representative or shop steward can help with advice including accompanying the employee to meetings with the bully.

Union representatives should ask about separating the bully and the victim until the situation improves. Don't make the target of bullying responsible for solving the problem she/he didn't cause. Make sure that the bullying victim agrees before taking action.

If both the bully and the target are union members, get another union rep to represent the bully.

NYSUT labor relations specialists can help with recommendations for workplace bullying policy and/or contract language including statements of behavioral expectations for all employees.

Following the recommendations outlined above can help bring down those inexcusable numbers and improve the climate and culture for NYSUT members wherever they work.

The NYSUT workplace bullying toolkit has sample policies, contract language, a training module, online resources and more. You can find it at www.nysut.org/healthandsafety.



ENOUGH ALREADY!



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