

Glossary of Workplace Bullying Terms

The notion of workplace bullying can be difficult to understand and to verbalize in a concrete fashion. On one hand, workplace bullying may be difficult to grasp if one has no personal experience with it. On the other hand, individual experience with the concept can cloud one's judgment as to its broader implications.

Where one lives and what literature one reads can also create confusion as to what is included or excluded from the term "workplace bullying." This is because different semantics and different streams of thought have been developed across the western world to describe the possible variations and combinations of inappropriate and unsafe behaviour in the workplace. In particular, people are often confused about the difference between workplace bullying and workplace violence, and between bullying and discrimination. Further complicating matters is that research and government documents will often use workplace bullying-related vocabulary incorrectly or interchangeably when in fact different terms refer to distinctly different phenomena.

Workplace bullying

A term originating from the European research tradition, "workplace bullying" refers to repeated, persistent aggressive behaviour between employees in a workplace that escalates over time and leads to the victimization of the target. This includes such behaviours as constant nitpicking, intimidation through body language or verbal threats, yelling and screaming, setting impossible deadlines, isolating the target, creating inconsistent rules and stealing credit for work done. However, workplace bullying must not be confused with the "legitimate exercise of managerial authority." This fine line is often difficult to distinguish, being a matter of perception that will differ between the victim, the bully and the observers. Workplace bullying can arise from many sources, and fall anywhere between a range of being "dispute related, arising out of an initial or ongoing conflict" to being "predatory, where a victim may be an unprovocative and opportunistic target." It can take place along and across all levels of a workplace hierarchy. The best illustration of the wide variation in aggressive behaviours that can constitute workplace bullying is the number of different types of bullies that have been identified by various academics, such as the imitative bully, the cyber bully, the verbal bully, the "gatekeeper" and the "two-headed snake."

Workplace violence

A term originating from the United States, "workplace violence" refers to when an employee is abused, threatened or assaulted in the workplace. This typically involves physical force and verbalized threats, but can also include robbery, intimidation and stalking. Workplace violence can also be aimed toward creating emotional damage, which can lead to negative physical effects without the aggressor actually laying a hand on the victim.

In contrast to workplace bullying, workplace violence is both generally more corporeal in nature and easier to distinguish due to its blatant brutality. Also in contrast to bullying, workplace violence can be a single opportunistic incident in addition to being “ongoing, random, persistent or premeditated behaviour.” Lastly, the perpetrator of workplace bullying can come both from within, such as an employee or supervisor, or from without, such as a customer. Thus, while not all instances of workplace bullying constitute workplace violence, instances of workplace violence more often also fit the characteristics of workplace bullying. Furthermore, workplace bullying can sometimes escalate into outbursts of workplace violence, such as when a bullied employee goes on a shooting rampage at his or her office.

Psychological harassment

The term “psychological harassment” has been and can be used somewhat interchangeably with “bullying,” as it refers to persistent and repetitive aggressive behaviour that aims to victimize a target.

Although psychological harassment encompasses both physical and psychological effects, the term does differ slightly from that of “workplace bullying” in its strong emphasis on the emotionally humiliating or psychologically degrading aspects of bullying. The definition of psychological harassment also underscores the importance of workers being given dignity in their workplace.

Mobbing

Originally used to describe animal behaviour, the term “mobbing” was reinvented in the early 1980s to also refer to a certain type of group behaviour in the workplace. Mobbing is best described as group bullying, or a “collective campaign by co-workers to exclude, punish, and humiliate a targeted worker.” A person in a position of power or social influence usually initiates the mobbing, but his or her aggressive behaviour then quickly spreads to other employees.

Mobbing is similar to workplace bullying in that it escalates in frequency and severity over time, although in the case of mobbing this is due to the development of a social norm. This norm has been described as a virus, passing from one employee to the next. But mobbing can also be viewed as a cycle, in which more and more employees adopt bullying behaviour, which in turn leads to the bullying of a target becoming more acceptable, which in turn leads the bullies to employ more severe forms of aggression, which then prompts other employees to join the bullies...

Discrimination

In the workplace sense, “discrimination” refers making a distinction against a person based on the group, class or category to which that person belongs, rather than on his or her actual merit. Discrimination can take place on the basis of sex, race, religion, physical or mental disability, sexual orientation, age, and so forth.

This term is usually placed outside the definition of “workplace bullying” because the aggressor’s actions are based on categorical prejudice rather than personal conflict between individuals. Also, victims of discrimination are usually able to seek remedy or intervention through anti-discrimination or equal opportunity laws, whereas these statutes only rarely protect victims of bullying.

Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment can be defined as the making of “unwanted and offensive sexual advances or of sexually offensive remarks or acts, especially by one in a superior or supervisory position or when acquiescence to such behaviour is a condition of continued employment, promotion or satisfactory evaluation.”

Sexual harassment differs from workplace bullying in at least two ways. First, it is distinctly sexual in nature, whereas bullying can involve a broader range of harassment behaviour. Second, the definition of sexual harassment places an emphasis on it taking place within a superior-subordinate relationship, which is what gives the aggressor the leverage necessary to, for example, demand sexual favours in exchange for favour. This differs from workplace bullying, where harassment often occurs between employees of similar rank and where research recognizes that subordinates are able to bully their bosses under certain circumstances.

Rudeness or Incivility

Rudeness or incivility refers to offensive or undignified behaviour that is generally deemed to be socially unacceptable or inconsiderate. This includes acts ranging from incivility, to uncouthness, to discourteousness, to improper grooming.

Rudeness or incivility does not constitute workplace bullying, however, unless or until it is aimed towards a target with the intent to victimize.

Sources Used

- “The Distinction Between Workplace Bullying and Workplace Violence and the Ramifications for Occupational Health and Safety” discussion paper by Job Watch <http://www.job-watch.org.au/jwissues/ciwvwbros.pdf>
- the Workplace Bullying Institute <http://bullyinginstitute.org/education/bbstudies/violence.html> and <http://bullyinginstitute.org/education/bbstudies/bullytypes.html>
- Life After Adult Bullying <http://www.lifeafteradultbullying.com/620/index.html>
- “Bullying in the Workplace” page by the Canada Safety Council <http://www.safety-council.org/info/OSH/bullies.html>
- mobbing.ca <http://members.shaw.ca/mobbing/mobbingCA/introduction.htm>
- worktrauma.org <http://www.worktrauma.org/change/definitions.htm>
- various sources pulled by dictionary.com <http://dictionary.reference.com/>