

WORDS OF AUTHORITY

**Michael Williams, Dean, School of Business and Management,
Thomas Edison State University**

**Joseph Youngblood II, Vice Provost and Dean, John S. Watson School
of Public Service, Thomas Edison State University**

Workplace Bullying: Rage, Resistance and Reform

Bullying is ubiquitous. Its influence is psychologically toxic and its impact on workplace productivity is debilitating. Bullying has emerged as a threat to organizational growth and sustainability. According to a 2014 study from The Workplace Bullying Institute, approximately 66 million workers report being affected by bullying. Pier M. Forni, author of *The Civility Solution*, offers that, "in today's America, incivility is on prominent display: in the schools, where bullying is pervasive; [and] in the workplace, where employees are more stressed out by co-workers than their jobs."

Quantifying the influence of bullying on business results is challenging. However, it is estimated that bullying costs organizations in excess of \$200 billion annually. A 2012 WBI poll of 800 managers and employees in 17 industries indicated that, among employees who had been bullied, 48 percent intentionally decreased their work effort, 63 percent lost work time avoiding the offender and 78 percent reported that their commitment to the organization declined. In her book, *Surviving Bullies, Queen Bees & Psychopaths in the Workplace*, author Patricia Barnes writes that workplace bullying is likely the "single most preventable and needless expense on a company's register."

Rage

Bullying is a complex condition. It shares several behavioral characteristics associated with narcissistic personality disorder. For example, bullies strive to exert power and control over others, are insensitive to others' needs and emotions, and exhibit arrogant and dismissive behaviors.

Psychologically, these behaviors are rooted in self-loathing, fragile self-esteem and an insatiable need for attention. As a result, bullies are full of rage, the depth of their self-hatred manifested in the punishing of others.

The aforementioned 2012 WBI study defined workplace bullying as "repeated mistreatment: sabotage by others that prevented work from getting done, verbal abuse, threatening conduct, intimidation and humiliation."

Given the corrosive effect of bullying on employee engagement, human resource management professionals must be vigilant in identifying and addressing it. A key step in combating bullying is establishing an organizational culture that does not tolerate bullying and forcefully addresses it.

This cultural context is essential to neutralizing the negative impact of bullying on workplace productivity, as well as reducing the possibility of litigation.

Allison Vaillancourt, vice president for human resources at the University of Arizona, states that "protecting a bully is not a strategy for protecting the institution. Savvy HR professionals need to understand that bullies create potential liability and should be focused on confirming bad behavior and getting it to stop."

Resistance

Bullying erodes employee commitment, performance and productivity. Yet employers and employees often neither report nor confront it. The 2014 WBI study indicates that "employers fail to appropriately react to abusive conduct much more frequently than they take positive steps to ameliorate bullying." Shockingly, these behaviors led to 61 percent of bullied victims losing their jobs, being forced out or fired in order to stop the bullying. Surprisingly, bullied employees often do not report their experiences to employers. While seemingly self-sabotaging, those who are bullied have cause for concern in reporting. Allegations of bullying are serious and employees



are concerned about employer retaliation.

Reform

Unlike other forms of workplace abuse, bullying is not deemed illegal by federal and state legislation. According to the American Bar Association, "despite all of the legislation associated with protected classes, primarily through Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, laws at both the federal and state levels still fail to protect workers from being mistreated in the workplace where the mistreatment is not based on a protected status." The ABA reports that "to date, 26 states have introduced anti-bullying bills; however, none of the bills have been passed."

Without the benefit of legislation to inhibit bullying, organizations will continue to pay the high price that bullying inflicts on the workplace. From a psychosocial perspective, human resource professionals can play a critical role in reducing the cost and eliminating workplace bullying through cultivating cultures of resilience. Through establishing "zero-tolerance" for bullying workplaces, evidenced in employee-awareness programs, clear and actionable anti-bullying policies and employee-centered resources and supports, workplace trust and productivity can be restored.

Workplace bullying presents a "clear and present danger" to organizational productivity and sustainability. Human resource management professionals might consider adopting the mantra "Bullying—Bad for Business!"