Sticks and Stones may Break Your Bones, but Words can Break Your Spirit: Bullying in the Workplace

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ABSTRACT. Workplace bullying has a well-established body of research internationally, but the United States has lagged behind the rest of the world in the identification and investigation of this phenomenon. This paper presents a managerial perspective on bullying in organizations. The lack of attention to the concept of workplace dignity in American organizational structures has supported and even encouraged both casual and more severe forms of harassment that our workplace laws do not currently cover. The demoralization victims suffer can create toxic working environments and impair organizational productivity. Some methods of protecting your organization from this blight of bullying are proposed.

Bullying has always been part of the human condition; history is rife with references to abuse of power and unnecessary or excessive force. The classic bully story is of Joseph and his brothers, a tale of envy and hostility. The refinement of bullying to include various forms of legally defined social harassment is a relatively late phenomenon, however, dating to the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In the United States, bullying is not illegal, whereas it is illegal in many other countries. Bullying is not about benign teasing, nor does it include the off-color jokes, racial slurs, or unwelcome advances that are the hallmarks of legally defined harassment. Workplace bullying is the pattern of destructive and generally deliberate demeaning of co-workers or subordinates that reminds us of the activities of the schoolyard bully. Unlike the schoolyard bully, however, the workplace bully is an adult, usually (but not always) aware of the impact of his or her behavior on others. Bullying in the workplace, often tacitly accepted by the organizational leadership, can create an environment of psychological threat that diminishes corporate productivity and inhibits individual and group commitment. The two examples that follow will help to clarify the difference between harassment and bullying.

KEY WORDS: workplace bullying

Anita Hill and harassment

In 1981, I was introduced to now Judge Thomas by a mutual friend. Judge Thomas told me that he was anticipating a political appointment and asked if I would be interested in working with him. He was, in fact, appointed as Assistant Secretary of Education for Civil Rights. After he had taken that post, he asked if I would become his assistant and I accepted that position ...

After approximately 3 months of working there, he asked me to go out socially with him. What hap-
pened next and telling the world about it are the two most difficult things, experiences of my life. It is only after a great deal of agonizing consideration and a number of sleepless nights that I am able to talk of these unpleasant matters to anyone but my close friends.

I declined the invitation to go out socially with him, and explained to him that I thought it would jeopardize what at the time I considered to be a very good working relationship. I had a normal social life with other men outside of the office. I believed then, as now, that having a social relationship with a person who was supervising my work would be ill advised. I was very uncomfortable with the idea and told him so.

I thought that by saying “no” and explaining my reasons, my employer would abandon his social suggestions. However, to my regret, in the following few weeks he continued to ask me out on several occasions. He pressed me to justify my reasons for saying “no” to him. These incidents took place in his office or mine. They were in the form of private conversations which would not have been overheard by anyone else.

My working relationship became even more strained when Judge Thomas began to use work situations to discuss sex. On these occasions, he would call me into his office for reports on education issues and projects or he might suggest that because of the time pressures of his schedule, we go to lunch to a government cafeteria. After a brief discussion of work, he would turn the conversation to a discussion of sexual matters. His conversations were very vivid ... On several occasions Thomas told me graphically of his own sexual prowess. Because I was extremely uncomfortable talking about sex with him at all, and particularly in such a graphic way, I told him that I did not want to talk about these subjects. I would also try to change the subject to education matters or to nonsexual personal matters, such as his background or his beliefs. My efforts to change the subject were rarely successful ... For my first months at the EEOC, where I continued to be an assistant to Judge Thomas, there were no sexual overtures. However, during the fall and winter of 1982, these began again. The comments were random, and ranged from pressing me about why I didn’t go out with him, to remarks about my person appearance. I remember him saying that some day I would have to tell him the real reason that I wouldn’t go out with him. He began to show displeasure in his tone and voice and his demeanor in his continued pressure for an explanation. He commented on what I was wearing in terms of whether it made me more or less sexually attractive. The incidents occurred in his inner office at the EEOC. (Testimony of Anita Hill from the U.S. Senate hearings on the nomination of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court, 1991).

Celia Zimmerman and bullying

The plaintiff, Celia G. Zimmerman, filed a complaint at MCAD against the defendants, Direct Federal Credit Union, and its president and CEO, David Breslin.

Shortly after delivering her complaint to Breslin, the plaintiff alleged that her situation at the credit union deteriorated.

For example, although the plaintiff, as a member of management, had regularly attended annual meetings, she was not asked to attend the annual meeting in March 1997.

When the plaintiff was called upon to attend meetings, she testified that her attempts to participate in the meetings were ignored by Breslin.

After the plaintiff gave notice of her intention to pursue her discrimination claim in court, a company meeting was called in which Breslin spoke about “integrity” and commented that he would have expected some employees would have already left the employ of the credit union.

The plaintiff and some fellow employees testified that they believed these comments were directed specifically at her.

In November 1997, the plaintiff was asked to give a presentation at a board meeting. Breslin updated the members of the board on the status of the plaintiff’s lawsuit immediately before she made her presentation.

After this incident, the plaintiff never attended another board meeting.

In early 1998, the plaintiff was assigned the goal of improving the compliance function at the credit union.