

Workplace Bullying and Incivility: More than Meets the Eye

Bullying and incivility occur in organizations all around the world, and it is important to recognize the consequences of these negative workplace behaviors on employees and organizations alike. Bullying and incivility wreak havoc in organizations, leading to higher rates of turnover, burnout, and decreased employee satisfaction and motivation. With such detrimental consequences, it becomes crucial to understand how to prevent organizations from experiencing these negative behaviors and provide practical suggestions that may decrease or reduce the potential risks of bullying and incivility.

Noorain Chaudhry

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Workplace bullying and incivility have been a hot topic of research in recent years, which resulted in a wealth of information on the impact that workplace bullying can have on employees. Recent articles published in both academic research and public media outlets discuss the increase in workplace bullying, and how although it seems to be a much *talked-about* issue, not much is being done to address it (Kadilak, 2014). Whether bullying comes from a supervisor or a co-worker, the effects can lead to a number of issues, including disengagement at work, loss of motivation, and even health complications (Vartia, 2001). In a research study conducted by Nielsen, Nielsen, Notelaers, & Einarsen (2015), workplace bullying was shown to lead to an increase in suicidal thoughts. With such disturbing recent findings, workplace bullying becomes an even more pressing issue. The researchers found a significant difference in those who work in hostile environments opposed to those who do not, with the victims experiencing an increase in suicidal ideations after the bullying exposure at work.

In a study by Einarsen, Hoel, and Notelaers (2009), the Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised—an instrument that focuses on

measuring exposure to bullying, was distributed to employees in 70 different organizations in the private, public and voluntary sectors of Great Britain. A total of 5,288 respondents reported employee perceptions of psychosocial work environment (job satisfaction, job commitment, and job climate), absenteeism and intent to leave, mental health concerns, and impact of leadership. The researchers described workplace bullying as “the persistent exposure to internal aggression and mistreatment from colleagues, superiors, or subordinates” (Einarsen, Hoel, & Notelaers, 2009, p.24). The study concluded that victims of bullying experienced higher levels of sickness and health issues, accompanied by absenteeism, poor performance, as well as intentions to leave their current work environment. The targets of bullying also rated their superiors as exhibiting abusive leadership qualities, and their workplace environment quality as poor.

Causes of Bullying

With such devastating consequences occurring for both organizations and employees due to workplace bullying, recent research has focused

on identifying underlying causes of bullying and where bullying originates from within the organization. Better understanding of origins of bullying should help employers create better workplace environments for their employees. In a study published in the *Journal of Managerial Issues*, Rousseau, Eddleston, Patel, and Kellermanns (2014) investigate the influence of organizational resources and demands on workplace bullying. Rousseau et al. (2014) explain how most research has identified individual differences among targets and victims in their relations to bullying, overlooking the importance of organizational factors. Interestingly, research suggests that the organizational environment plays a more significant role and provides many more factors that contribute to workplace bullying than individual differences. Organizational resources are framed as trust in management, and work demands are described as role overload (when an employee has too many tasks to attend to, and not enough support or resources to complete them).

Rousseau et al. (2014) hypothesized that trust in management, when low, increases perceptions of bullying, and role overload, when experienced, causes an employee to perceive themselves as a target of bullying. They also hypothesized that more job autonomy and employee participation and voicing their concerns moderates the relationship between perceived bullying and both organizational resources and work demands. Results concluded that less trust in management led to increased perception of workplace bullying, and that higher levels of job autonomy did moderate this effect.

Causes of Incivility

Workplace incivility is negative workplace behavior that is less severe than bullying, but occurs more frequently, and has a major impact on both employees and organizations. In a study published in the *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, Beattie and Griffin (2014) observed employee behavioral responses to workplace incivility. The researchers describe incivility as “a form of interpersonal mistreatment...low-intensity behavior with ambiguous intent to harm...includes incidents that range from what is perceived as a mild slight to general rudeness or disrespect” (Beattie & Griffin, 2014). They discuss how incivility, much like bullying, is associated with an array of negative individual and organizational consequences like psychological distress, depression, anxiety, low creativity and performance, mental and physical illness, higher absenteeism and turnover rates, increased job stress and job withdrawal, and much more. Beattie & Griffin’s conducted a diary study among 323 employees of a security company. Of the 323, 92 successfully completed all eight diary studies the researchers had requested to complete. The employees were asked to complete eight daily surveys that measured exposure to incivility and the reactions the employees had towards it.

The results were that the most common response to critical incidents of incivility was to ignore or avoid the instigator (72% of participants chose this option) and that the least common reaction was to react negatively to someone other than the instigator. About 43% of the critical incidents led to a negative reaction to the actual instigator of the incivility.

The findings also suggested that victims of incivility seek support to decrease their negative feelings. These results are important to take note of considering incivility at work is common and can become a daily hassle for employees and supervisors alike.

Bullying and Incivility on the Rise

With such strong scientific evidence of detrimental consequences of workplace bullying and incivility on organizations and employees, why is it that the rates of bullying and incivility continue to increase? Workplace bullying is very costly for employers, leading to higher turnover, lower productivity, and potential lawsuits. With such growing concerns for organizations, one would assume organizations are doing more to address this prevalent issue, but research shows that these phenomena often go unnoticed and are often ignored or brushed under the rug.

In an article published in the Loudoun Times, Kadilak (2014) discusses that sexual harassment laws are in place in the work environment, yet there are no laws to prevent bullying, which has similar psychological, emotional, and physical consequences on its victims. According to the article, U.S. businesses alone spend around \$250 million each year due to the costs of consequences like retraining employees after high turnover rates have occurred, healthcare issues, litigation and legal issues, and many more incidents that may occur due to bullying and its effects. In most instances, bullying is not taken seriously and may occur for years, even up to decades, without anything being done about it. The consequences usually include the employee leaving because nothing is being

done to change or address the bullying exposure.

Suggestions to Decrease Bullying

- Kadilak (2014) points out that organizations with established rules for facilitating healthy relationships between superiors and employees, emphasis on creative problem solving, and vocalization of employee concerns usually thrive the most and also benefit in cost and productivity due to the healthier work environment.
- Einarsen et al. (2009) demonstrated that the presence of bullying is most strongly correlated with autocratic leadership styles and negative experiences or relationships with co-workers. These findings suggest social support is necessary for employees to succeed in their workplace, and creating organizational environments that prevent and/or minimize autocratic and negative co-worker behaviors may decrease damaging behaviors like absenteeism, turnover, and low performance.
- Rousseau et al. (2014) suggested that having the option to participate more in the delegation of tasks lessened the effect of bullying and work demands. These findings are crucial to organizations because they provide specific recommendations and suggestions on how to lessen workplace bullying effects by using measures that are reasonably within an organization's control.

As research on workplace bullying expands, a variety of further suggestions to prevent its occurrence will become available to organizations. Providing employees with proper

resources and attention may be all it takes to avoid the devastating consequences that accompany negative workplace treatment.

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About the Author

Noorain Chaudhry is a student at Vanguard University of Southern California Master of Science Program in Organizational Psychology.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Noorain Chaudhry at noorain.chaudhry@vanguard.edu.