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Defensive management in a bully-saturated era

Beware, HR professionals. Over the next few years, there will be a dramatic increase in employee complaints and legal action related to bullying.

There are three main reasons to brace yourselves. First, new anti-bullying legislation is already in place in Quebec and Saskatchewan and sure to launch in other provinces in the foreseeable future. Second, an increasing number of unions are including bullying-related clauses in their collective agreements, thereby raising members' awareness and requiring greater organizational accountability.

Third, the issue has become a hot media agenda. To illustrate, in 1986-1987 bullying was mentioned in the *Toronto Star* 91 times and in the *Globe and Mail* 62 times. By 2006-2007 these numbers soared to 358 and to 273 respectively.

These trends suggest a greater likelihood managers will be accused of bullying, whether they deserve it or not.

The good news is this heightened awareness will serve as a welcome vehicle for curbing the behaviour of managers who are indeed bullies. The bad news is it may also result in creating an altogether different kind of risk: Hard-working, decent managers may find themselves unfairly accused of bullying, thereby triggering a set of negative repercussions for themselves and the organization.

Four high-sensitivity situations

There are four particular situations that may give rise to bullying accusations even for the non-bully manager. The following are common yet inherently problematic:

Performance management: When a manager has to closely scrutinize an employee's poor performance, the perception of unfair or harsh treatment may readily emerge.

Situations requiring exercise of authority and power: Even simple decisions regarding vacation or allotment of professional development days can be highly sensitive and open to misinterpretation.



■ GUEST COMMENTARY

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Time crunches: During high-stakes time crunches, many managers resort to authoritarian or micro-management practices, and their stressed-out employees may experience the demands as bullying.

Feedback in public: Any situation where a manager provides public feedback that is critical or points to the need for improvement is by definition problematic and sensitive.

Management must be equipped with skills to avoid any perception of bullying in these situations. HR professionals can demonstrate true leadership in assisting managers in developing best practices that will protect them from bullying accusations in these situations.

Unfortunately, organizations are at risk because many managers are not trained to navigate these situations with an eye to the bullying-related ramifications. Good risk management involves procuring specialized training that will improve managers' skill levels in respect-related practices and handling highly sensitive situations.

A good training program will explain the concept of "perceived justice," the degree to which employees perceive they are treated fairly by the organization and its leaders, and describe its elements.

An effective program will also include four basic strategies for navigating high-sensitivity situations, including:

Performance management: To decrease the potential danger in a situation where

you have to monitor someone's performance very closely, involve your own manager in advance. If your actions are ever questioned, this will demonstrate the steps you took were legitimate in the course of routine supervisory activities. It is also important to be gracious and respectful even when you have to closely scrutinize an employee. As well, extremely detailed note-taking is an absolute must.

Situations requiring exercise of authority and power: Before making a decision, get the employee's input, ideas and suggested alternatives. Once a decision is made, convey it in such a way the person understands how the decision was made and why it is fair.

Time crunches: Tremendous pressure to meet a goal or deadline doesn't give managers a blank cheque to change behaviour. They need to take the time to explain, right at the outset, why the deadline is necessary and why the demand level will increase over the next while. Make sure to ask about and respect people's limitations and workload. Ask them how as a team and as a leader you can make the situation more tolerable. And finally, keep your calm and manage your emotions even under the stress of deadlines.

Feedback in public: Follow the golden rule, "Praise in public, correct in private." There rarely exists a legitimate need to highlight someone's mistakes in public.

HR needs to help prepare organizations and managers for the potential hazards associated with unwarranted bullying accusations. Managers can be taught how to navigate their daily responsibilities as well as high sensitivity situations in ways that will help them steer clear of unfairly being accused of bullying practices.

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