

Reflections from Copenhagen

When it comes to workplace bullying, it's time for us to stop working in silos

It's been nearly 30 years since Scandinavian researchers began studying the phenomenon of psychological abuse in the workplace. I recently had an opportunity to attend the International Conference on Workplace Bullying in Denmark and it appears the research community across the globe is still struggling with some very fundamental questions.

What is bullying? Currently, there's no consensus regarding the exact meaning of this term. All experts agree bullying is characterized by a repeated pattern of behaviour that undermines a person's credibility, social standing or work performance. However, beyond that, definitions and measuring methods vary greatly.

Does bullying have to be intentional? Contrary to widespread misconception, most experts agree bullying does not require proof of intention by the perpetrator. In reality, bullying has to be intentional only if the jurisdiction in which a business operates defines it as such.

Researchers, HR professionals differ on definitions of bullying: What you see working in the trenches is not what you see working in the research lab. One of the most encouraging developments is an effort led by Suzy Fox of the Institute of Human Resources and Employment Relations at Loyola University in Chicago, which will synthesize the research perspective with the real-life perceptions of HR professionals to craft a new method for measuring bullying.

What is the true prevalence of workplace bullying? The answer depends on the type of questions you pose. Studies that employ a strict definition of bullying point to prevalence as low as three per cent, whereas studies that use broader definitions demonstrate a prevalence as high as 69 per cent — yes, you read that correctly.

Bullying has many manifestations: For many years, bullying was perceived to comprise of a person or group targeting another person. However, with more information coming in



GUEST COMMENTARY

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from practitioners who are working with real people, solving real problems, it's becoming clearer that often what is referred to as bullying is really an escalated conflict between two people, with one person gaining the strategic advantage of being recognized as "the target" by filing a bullying complaint.

Bullying is more geocentric than previously considered: Behaviours that might be considered threatening or exclusionary in one country might be perfectly legitimate in another. So, research findings from one country are only partially applicable to other countries.

We lack quality data about the bully: Our current understanding of workplace bullying is based almost exclusively on the experiences of targets. Researchers have not studied the inner world of perpetrators, who are often perceived as evil predators. And yet, as someone specializing in coaching abrasive leaders, I know once you engage with these so-called bullies, it becomes clear they do not consciously set out to harm others, nor are they aware of the impact of their behaviour. Once they become aware of the negative impact of their conduct and obtain new skills, they tend to make significant changes.

Determining who the real bully is can be tricky: Once a person steps forward with a bullying complaint, organizational systems

tend to automatically label that person as the target/victim and the person against whom the complaint was made is labelled the perpetrator/bully. However, a number of mediation and investigation experts found that in 20 per cent to 30 per cent of cases, the complainant is just as much of a bully as the alleged perpetrator, or worse.

In some cases, mediation can be a viable option: Many experts used to maintain that mediation is counterintuitive due to the inherent power imbalance between perpetrator and target. But new mediation methods informed by justice theories are reported to be highly effective, especially when the bullying proves to be a case of escalated conflict.

HR is perceived to be part of the problem: Many of the presentations at the Denmark conference and other conferences demonstrate that, in far too many situations, HR is ineffective in dealing with bullying issues. Even worse, HR is at times perceived to be colluding with the bully.

In order to be effective in tackling the overall bullying problem, we need the various bodies who are involved in this issue to stop working in silos and begin sharing ideas and information. This would include legislatures, the court system, employment lawyers, researchers, unions, management, bullying activists, the media and practitioners.

In countries such as Denmark, where the government just declared a major initiative to reduce "psychological overload" in the workplace by 20 per cent, everyone has no choice but to collaborate. It's high time for us in Canada to do so as well.

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