



They say...

Employees Targeted in the Workplace are just too Sensitive.

We say...

Bullies in the Workplace are too Abusive!

by Linda R. Crockett

Research does not indicate that those who are targeted in the workplace are weak or unskilled. Many make assumptions based on the stereotype of childhood bullying, that the employee hasn't stood up for themselves. For decades society blamed and shamed victims of domestic violence and sexual assault. Thankfully for the most part, this has been corrected. But now we are now doing the same thing to those who are targeted by workplace bullies. Many assume the target is at fault. In my opinion this is driven by their own fear of confronting this behaviour. Many just don't like conflict, avoid messy feelings, and fear being next. This workplace abuse has a stigma created by assumptions, misinformation, shaming and blaming, and fear. Therefore, many who are targeted, isolate and remain silent. Like domestic violence and sexual assault, the abuse causes those who are targeted to be paralyzed by self doubt, loss of confidence and safety, and the loss of their voice. The following statements from colleagues or family members dismiss, ignore, minimize and silence targets even further.

"It's just a personality conflict"

"Just stay under the radar.... that's just they way he/she is!"



"If you don't cooperate like the rest of us (i.e.: walk on eggs), it will be your fault that she is raging on you!"

"Silence enables workplace bullying to continue". Gary Namie

Avoidance of dealing with workplace abuse of power is a societal and systems issue. Education is key to dismantling confusion, correct misleading information, and remove damaging assumptions. Education needs to focus on expanding awareness and opening minds to finding solutions for all employees.

Research informs us that many targets of bullying are hard working, ethical, dedicated, and skilled employees. Over the past 8 ½ yrs. I have seen thousands of employees from all types of professions. They are intelligent professionals with excellent communication skills. Workplace bullying is not about the incompetence of the employee targeted, it is about the incompetence of the one who expressing abusive comments and behaviours. Without qualified training for employees to see the signs, tactics and profiles of those causing this harm, and of the human experience of those being harmed, it is difficult to understand how deeply insidious this really abuse is. These cases are complex. It is important to informed and prepared.

When a work environment does not protect employees from psychological harm, everyone and everything is impacted. Including the employee's family members.

We often hear comments that the targeted employee is too sensitive, or hypersensitive. We need to change the negative stigma about being sensitive. Somehow being sensitive places



blame on those who are being harmed. It is a way to scapegoat, shame and silence the person who is being

targeted. Many of us are in careers that require sensitivity. This a skill that helps professions become more authentic, express empathy and understanding, incorporate creative problem-solving skills into complex situations, practice with an open mind and curiosity, and produces innovative problem solving. The very skill our clients appreciate most. Targets are not too sensitive; bullies are to abusive.

We need to understand the signs and symptoms of psychological harassment to better understand the emotions, resulting isolation, and other reactions of the employee harmed. For some people this shows up as anxiety, panic attacks, loss of self confidence, isolation, depression. All of these are symptoms of PTSD. You may be labelling and dismissing someone in your workplace as “too sensitive” while they are experiencing symptoms of PTSD.

Lastly, labelling targets as 'too sensitive' sends the message that the abuse would be otherwise acceptable for those who are not, as they say, 'too sensitive'. In my own workplace bullying experience, my acting supervisor was a pastor in a Cancer Center. She told me that I needed to develop alligator skin, like she has. Tell me, do you want a pastor, nurse, or social worker, with



alligator skin? In a Cancer Centre? Clearly this was her standard of practise and unhealthy safety mechanism. Certainly not one that I was willing to adapt.

When addressing workplace bullying, we must first understand the definition.

Workplace bullying is about a variety of tactics (i.e.: rumours, lies, sabotage), used over a period of time (minimally 3 months or more), with intent to harm (i.e.: shame, humiliate, diminish, sabotage) someone or others.

The word "intent" needs to be considered and appropriately assessed. Each case is unique. We do have narcissists, sociopaths and psychopaths in our workplaces however, they do not make up the majority of workplace bullying offenders. After an investigation identifies a disruptive employee with bullying behaviours, wise employers will send the identified employee to me for my combined 'coaching, education, and brief counselling or treatment program'. The employer often wishes to keep the disruptive employee on staff stating they are very skilled, but they want them to stop these offensive and damaging behaviours. If the identified employee prefers to keep their job, then they must agree to see me.

To date I have not worked with offenders who are narcissists, sociopaths or psychopaths. They refuse to see someone like me. They are busy blaming everyone else. They will never be accountable.



Perpetrators

The perpetrators of bullying in the workplace that I have worked with over the years have lost connection to their own moral gage, personal values, and sense of self. In our work together we shift through layers of denial, justifications, excuses, minimizing, resistance, and eventually get through all those barriers to find meaning. We discover connections between life events, work experiences, education, training, or skill levels, to explain their negative (defensive, offensive) coping mechanisms. I have been privileged to witness incredible realizations and transformations. With that I also witness very sincere remorse and motivation to repair and change. We need more employers sending these disruptive employees to experienced therapists for this unique process.

Investigations

Many investigations fail to identify "intent" and mistakenly conclude that they complaints are "unsubstantiated". This is often a terrible and costly error. Even highly trained investigators may not have the skills or training to cut through the complex layers of the perpetrators negative coping skills. Nor would leadership, human resources, or unions. Investigations need to focus on identifying inappropriate behaviours regardless of intent. Employers need to send the disruptive employee to a professional qualified and experienced to work with these complex cases. In the beginning stages, a workplace coach is not enough. What is needed is workplace coach who is a qualified and specialized workplace therapist. These cases need assessments, appropriate recommendations and referrals, contact with other treating professionals, and in some cases, clinical therapy. Men and women with bullying behaviours



have worked many years becoming skills at covering up, justifying, minimizing and disconnecting from the harm they are causing others. They have also been rewarded with praise and promotions. They know how to get through an investigation. In fact, we have workplace bullies who groom others into believing

their behaviours are acceptable and expected. Working with these employees is a specialized area.

Targeted Employees

For those who are harmed; after a period of repeated abuse and resulting long term stress, an employee targeted by a workplace bully will show symptoms of i.e.: fatigue, physical illness, appear dishevelled or disorganized, display emotional outbursts, become reactive, defensive, and/or forgetful. Like spouses or children of domestic violence, or the children of parents with addictions, the family members who are abused often look worse than the abusers. These patterns are clear and obvious - once you understand them.

Do Something Different

Take some training on this topic and share what you have learned about adult bullying. Start conversations on this topic, address assumptions, and direct people to read material that will bring them clarity.