

Bullies in the Midst

You remember the feeling: The meanest kid in school shows up at your locker—demanding your lunch money or sneering accusingly, “What’er you lookin’ at?”

The bully stereotype is imbedded in American pop culture: Popeye had Brutis, Laura Ingalls had Nellie Olsen, and Beaver Cleaver had Eddie Haskell. Eddie became famous for his ability to give people “the business” in many different forms—one minute he was turning on the charm for Mrs. Cleaver, “Well, hello Mrs. Cleaver, and how is young Theodore today?” And the next, turning cruelly on the Beav, “Hey, squirt, take a powder before I squash you like a bug.” Bullying and the awful feeling that accompanies it, lives in everyone’s consciousness, as either a personal experience or one communicated through the pop-culture lens. In the last decade, bullying has gotten much attention—blamed for school shootings and a host of other social problems facing today’s youth. Interestingly, it has raised its ugly head elsewhere, and business owners should take heed.

From the playground to the office

Where do all the bullies go? To work—and often in positions of power. When bullies become managers, the outcome for a business and its workers can be disastrous. According to a Workplace Bullying and Trauma Institute (WBTI) survey, one in six U.S. workers are victims of bullying. It is quickly becoming one of the most common and least detected (or dealt with) forms of workplace violence. Bullying is no joking matter. It is estimated to cost businesses between \$6 and \$13 billion dollars per year in health care costs.

Uncovering the bully (the bully in the closet)

Statistically, men and women alike perpetrate bullying, and at the root of it is the need to control. From public humiliation, to spreading rumors and doling out constant criticism, bullies take pleasure in wounding their victim’s self-esteem. Bullies threaten, set impossible deadlines, and verbally abuse in order to control a workplace. Often they appear supportive and understanding in front of others, a la Eddie Haskell, but are cruel and demeaning when alone with an employee. If your workers seem skittish, and you detect an overall sense of low morale at work, you could have a bully in your midst. As a result, your company will suffer high absenteeism and employee turnover, in addition to increased workers compensation costs and innumerable other problems. Eventually, you and your business will suffer.

Bullies beware

Currently there is no law protecting people from workplace bullying. However, a grassroots initiative is in place to create such legislation. The “Healthy Workplace” bill has been presented in several states and could offer help to workers in the future. Designed to help define workplace bullying and raise

awareness, the law's value will lie in its ability to incite employer action when bullying is suspected. Ignoring bullying could cost you your business and your workers.

Bully blueprint: recognizing and reorganizing

The writing on the wall: (Side bar)

- Sudden increases in absenteeism
- Repeated complaints
- High employee turnover
- Increase in work comp claims
- Frequent requests for transfer

Bully busters: (Side bar)

- Establish a bullying policy.
- Create methods for investigating, recording and dealing with conflict.
- Investigate complaints quickly and with confidentiality.
- Address the problem seriously at all levels.
- Raise awareness and provide education.

Accompanying blurb:

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