Workplace bullying prevention strategies ineffectiveness

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Abstract

Bullying in educational settings receives a lot of attention in the media as well as in the research. Yet, little attention is given to bullying in the workplace. This paper reviews literature to provide a definition of workplace bullying and the different types. The paper also analyzes the strategies currently used in preventing workplace bullying to argue that the present strategies serve a limited scope of what bullying can be in the workplace. This research paper draws two conclusions. First, workplace bullying strategies are not effective because four main reasons. Second, this paper sustains that strategies can only be effective if developers of such strategies have a holistic view of human beings, integrate and target the body, the soul and the mind in developing strategies that could prevent workplace bullying.

*Keywords: Workplace bullying, strategies, prevention, effective*
Bullying is often defined as the repetition of violent acts or aggressive actions directed towards individuals usually unable to defend themselves (Good, McIntosh & Gietz, 2011). Building on this definition of bullying, researchers in organizational psychology define workplace bullying as a succession of aggressive acts that have psychological effects on the victims (Johnson, 2011; Escartín, Carballeira, Zapf, Porrúa & Martín-Peña, 2009). Workplace bullying can also be defined as an ongoing behavior in which one or more individuals engage in with the intent to harm, humiliate, threaten or intimidate one or more persons in the workplace (Lewis & Orford, 2005; Hutchinson, Vickers, Wikes & Jackson, 2009).

In the 1990s, workplace bullying was described as a growing phenomenon and a topic for research in the field of organizational psychology (Escartín, Carballeira, Zapf, Porrúa & Martín-Peña, 2009). Approximately two decades later, bullying is identified as a pervasive stressor, spreading across any major employment sector and, harmful not only to the physical and mental health of individuals, but also to the organization reputation (Cleary, Hunt & Horsfall, 2010; Escartín, Carballeira, Zapf, Porrúa & Martín-Peña, 2009). Though workplace bullying prevalence depends largely on how it is measured (Johnson, 2009), researchers agree that bullying is an aspect of the contemporary workplace, and is part of the culture in different workplace environments (Barber, 2012; Bauman & Del Rio, 2006). The prevalence of workplace bullying calls today for a review of current practices in workplace bullying prevention, and the identification of a strategy that could prevent workplace bullying. This paper discusses the ineffectiveness of popular strategies used to prevent workplace bullying irrespective of the workplace environment. The paper also reviews alternatives to these strategies of workplace bullying prevention, and suggests an approach that could yield more results in the attempt to prevent workplace bullying.
Background and Terminology

Reference to harassment at work started in 1976 with Carroll Brodsky, an American psychiatric who the first in his book described bullying as “an harassment behavior involving repeated and persistent attempts by a person to torment, wear down, frustrate, or get a reaction from another person” (Brodsky as cited in Ng, 2011). Neglected in the 1970s, Brodsky’s work will be revealed by Scandinavian researchers many years later. These researchers first investigated childhood bullying, then workplace bullying (Ng, 2011). A Swedish researcher by the name of Heinz Leymann in the 1980s opened a clinic for work related issues in Sweden. Leymann coined the word “mobbing” in 1986 to refer to bullying occurring at work (Ng, 2011).

However, the word “mobbing” was used in the literature in the 1960s to describe the gathering of weak animals to aggressively defend themselves against predators (Korkmaz & Cemaloglu, 2010). Yet, Leyman was the first to use mobbing to describe adult behaviors (Korkmaz & Cemaloglu, 2010). Leymann studied the case of a number of nurses who committed or tried to commit suicide because of work related events. As a pioneer in the area of workplace bullying research, Leymann’s work received great attention and other Scandinavian academics followed his work (Zapf as cited by Ng, 2010).

In the 1990s, interest in workplace bullying grew tremendously as researchers focused on this specific aspect of workplace harassment, generating national and international debates, and a proliferation of research on the topic (Ng, 2010). The work undertaken in the field of workplace bullying tries to define the nature and extent of the problem. According to research some industries, or occupational groups are more exposed to workplace bullying than others. Nurses and teachers are groups that are most likely to “experience bullying at some point in their working lives” (Lewis, 2006).
Drawing on Brodsky’s and Leyman’s work, workplace bullying research has provided a wide variety of definitions of workplace bullying. These definitions usually refer to workplace bullying as any repeated and unfavorable actions that creates a hostile work environment (Hutchinson, Vickers, Wilkes & Jackson, 2010). The growing literature in this field reveals that bullying has left the playground of “childhood to the offices of adults business arenas” (Harvey, Heames, Richey & Leonard, 2006). Indeed, 50% of all Americans are reported to have experienced workplace bullying; while 35% have been bullied, and 15% witnessed bullying at work (Workplace Bullying Institute, 2010).

**The ineffectiveness of current strategies to prevent workplace bullying**

Strategies currently used to prevent workplace bullying are yet to be effective (Yoon, Barton & Taiariol, 2004). Literature shows that these strategies have but a limited and small impact on workplace bullying (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006). Their failure is justified by the methods used to prevent workplace bullying. Such methods do not change the individuals’ mind and therefore cannot yield the expected results. In addition, these strategies are based on the wrong assumption, and fail because of their focal point, and their neglect of learning theories.

**Summary of solutions**

Strategies currently used fail to prevent workplace bullying from happening, and alternative approaches are limited in their scope. A holistic approach to workplace bullying prevention strategy will yield more results as this approach integrates in the prevention strategies the concept of individuals as body, mind and soul. The holistic approach to workplace bullying prevention strategy advocates for addressing these three dimensions of individuals in the strategy to have a great impact on workplace bullying behavior.
Workplace bullying

Literature review

Current strategies are not preventing workplace bullying

The strategies currently used to prevent workplace bullying create an environment that favors or nurtures bullying. According to Zabrodska, Linnell, Laws and Davies (2011), as companies try to provide a workplace free of bullying behaviors, by developing a number of workplace behavior policies; they create a culture or system that is identified as causing bullying behaviors. Regulating behaviors leads to micromanagement, which is a type of management characterized by observation or close control of employees’ interactions with each other, in order to identify and categorize bullying behaviors and those who engage in them.

Policies and regulations do not affect the individual’s mind or worldview; they do not change one’s mindset or belief. It is important to keep in mind that bullying is just the external expression of one’s inner state. Reducing prevention programs to policies do not address the real issue, which is the mind of those engaging in such behaviors. Policies or regulations cannot regulate common sense. In other words, there is no law, or policy that can force one to do not do harm to others. No law can oblige an individual to follow the golden rule, which is “to do unto others as you would have others do unto you”. It is a personal decision, which is influence by or based on one’s beliefs, to treat others as s/he would like to be treated.

Furthermore, prevention strategies addressing workplace bullying are based on the wrong assumption, or understanding. These strategies addressing workplace bullying are based on the assumption that bullying at work is caused by conflicts. Therefore, ending conflicts at work between employees ends workplace bullying. Though some bullying behaviors stem from conflicts, these strategies focus on ending conflicts fail in addressing workplace bullying because its sources are many and diverse (Hutchinson, Vickers, Wilkens & Jackson (2009). According to
research, any tactic that seeks or influences negatively a group dynamics, perceptions, or behaviors can be considered bullying (Hutchinson, Vickers, Wilkes & Jackson, 2009).

Indeed, bullying behaviors are not limited to conflicts. Over checking, belittling, criticism, or sabotaging are part of bullying as well as ignoring or excluding someone, spreading rumors about someone, ignoring someone’s professional opinion, withholding work relevant information, or ridiculing and humiliating someone about work (Cleary, Hunt & Horsfall, 2010). The current strategies fail to recognize the diverse sources and manifestations of bullying. Lewis (2006) observes that bullying actions are difficult to pinpoint because they often happen behind closed doors and are subtle in their nature. For prevention strategies to just focus on conflict is ignoring and neglecting the complexity of bullying.

The failure of current strategies to preventing workplace bullying is also explained by the focal point of the strategies. These strategies mainly center on providing employees with information about and on bullying, without considering the employees’ attitudes or beliefs toward bullying (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006). Such strategies do not speak to the individual’s heart or mind; which makes almost impossible any transformation or change of attitude. As previously discussed, bullying has to do with beliefs and attitudes. Failing to consider and to integrate individuals’ beliefs or attitudes toward bullying in prevention strategies have but, a limited effect.

Finally, the current strategies in their approach ignore learning theories. Learning theories explain how individuals learn, how they develop mental models, or come to the conceptualization of specific behaviors (Altman, 2009). Not applying learning theories in the development and implementation of prevention strategies causes these strategies to be less effective. Knowing individuals’ experience, conceptualization, of bullying could help adjust the
strategies to the specific needs of the target population, instead of serving a pre-packaged formula that will not achieve the purpose, or produce a transformative experience. Researchers argue that engaging individuals in meaningful learning in bullying prevention training may lead to change conceptualization of workplace bullying, and change choices of actions regarding workplace bullying (Altman, 2009).

Nevertheless, some researchers support that the strategies currently used seem to have some impact on workplace bullying prevention. In fact, for some researchers, the development of policies by companies has the potential of preventing bullying in the workplace (Johnson, 2011; Martin & Lavan, 2010). Other strategies researchers suggest may diminish workplace bullying are the use of formal channel for reporting bullying behaviors at work; the training of employees on how to handle and respond to bullying; the provision of support at work for bullies; the formation of safety committees that could act oversee employment contract and job descriptions; and bullying prevention education. These strategies were identified in the literature as helping workplaces create some sort of awareness regarding bullying, and thus reducing the occurrences of such behaviors (Macintosh, 2006).

Although these strategies are identified in the literature as having some effect on workplace bullying, they focus more on helping individuals cope with bullying, than on preventing workplace bullying (Macintosh, 2006). It appears then that there is a need for strategies that tackle the issue of workplace bullying in order to prevent this behavior from happening in the workplace.

Alternatives to current prevention strategies and their limitations

Face with the prevalence of workplace bullying, researchers in this field agree that a new consideration must be given to the current strategies. Some argue that the inexistence of a
typology of workplace bullying is the main cause of the failure of the prevention strategies. Developing a typology of workplace bullying will actually mean studying all the types of workplace bullying and classifying them with the intent to allow organization to address the right bullying behaviors in the strategies they develop. They suggest that the popular approaches to workplace bullying prevention such as training, policies, seminars, employee orientation, and employee development programs fail because a typology of workplace bullying does not exist to inform the design of these interventions (Hutchinson, Vickers, Wilkes & Jackson, 2009).

The authors of this article highlight an interesting point. They look at workplace bullying from an expert’s or teacher’s perspective. Bringing up the absence of a typology of bullying behaviors to inform the elaboration of prevention strategies is unique. This unique perspective on the causes of workplace bullying strategies failure is what makes this article really interesting. There is certainly a need for a typology of bullying behaviors. Yet, to assume that the existence of a typology will inform the design of prevention strategies and cause them to be more effective is somewhat presumptuous. The development of informed prevention strategies is excellent. However, the question one could ask is to know how effective the strategies based on conflict have been in preventing bullying caused by conflict at work? The existence of conflict-based workplace bullying proves that well-informed strategies may not always result in effective prevention.

Cooper, Walker, Winters, Williams, Askew and Robinson (2009) have a proactive approach to prevention strategies. They sustain that workplace bullying is prevalent in the health care environment because bullying is not addressed while student nurses are still in nursing schools. The absence of strategies, or programs addressing bullying in nursing schools set the ground for unhealthy work environment, thus bullying behaviors in the workplace. For the
authors of this article, prevention of workplace bullying in the health care environment resides on strategies such as written policies, student orientation programs, seminars, training on bullying, and faculty development that include training on bullying to prevent bullying to occur when the trained nurse gets to the workplace. The best approach to preventing workplace bullying is in being proactive, and not reactive. In their view, nursing schools need to address the problem before the students get to the workplace.

Cooper, Walker, Winters, Williams, Askew and Robinson (2009) raise a very interesting point. They suggest a proactive application of the known strategies to workplace bullying prevention. However, these strategies they want to see implemented in a proactive way have already been applied in public schools and have not prevented bullying from happening in public school, nor in other workplaces. Therefore, the effectiveness of these proactive approaches to workplace bullying is not certain.

Literature also proposes an ethical approach to workplace bullying prevention. The establishment of ethics at work has the potential to produce a bully-free work environment. This approach is based on the assumption that every single person in every culture has some sense of ethics, or sense of duty, which is the desire to make choices that can be elevated to the status of a universal ethical axiom. Zabrodska, Linnell, Laws, and Davies (2011) contend that ethical practices cause each one of us to be mindful of and responsible for our behaviors, and “for singly and collectively engage in a rigorous critique of the discourses and practices that cause harm to self and to others” (p. 718). Ethics they advocate helps us recognize that each one of us has the potential to do harm, and thus can easily be caught in the production of bullying behaviors. This approach to workplace bullying prevention calls for an individual and collective self-examination, and is very unique.
However, their solution to workplace bullying has some pitfalls or limits as well. Ethics or ethical behaviors cannot really prevent workplace bullying from happening. Ethics is often defined as the knowledge of what is right or wrong. Ethics is also defined as the evaluation of human conduct based on morale principle. Unfortunately, morale principles stems from a variety of sources, which means that there are a variety of ethics. In such diversity, distinguishing right from wrong becomes challenging. In other words, a conduct may be wrong for one individual, but right for another one.

Bauman and Del Rio (2006) argue that the strategies used have but, small impact on bullying behaviors. They propose the inclusion of attitudes or beliefs of the individuals to be trained in order to have a real effect on bullying behaviors. Simply said, trainees should be assessed before participating in training so that their beliefs and attitudes toward bullying can be incorporated in the training. Bauman and Del Rio (2006) proposition is laudable. Nevertheless, changing the belief, conviction, or attitude of an individual does not depend on the amount of information or integration of his/her attitudes in a training program, but rather on his/her willingness to change.

**Solutions**

For effective strategies against workplace bullying, organizations, or trainers should think of combining different intervention strategies in order to stop bullying at work, and transform the attitudes and beliefs of employees. Prevention strategies should address the mind, body and soul of the target population for any meaningful result. Each strategy covered focused either on one aspect of workplace bullying, or on one source of bullying. Keeping in mind that humans are complex beings, prevention strategies should have a holistic approach to workplace bullying.
Developing strategies with a holistic approach is a great challenge. However, a smart combination of the existing strategies could be a way to consider. As workplaces become diverse, it becomes also imperative for employers to address workplace bullying in a very proactive way. The absence of a typology of workplace bullying creates a huge vacuum as well. Research need to be conducted in order to develop a typology of workplace behaviors. More importantly there is need for a workplace bullying strategy that would address the complex nature of individuals and result in a deeper transformation, a change of minds.

It is my belief that current strategies fail because they do not address workplace bullying in its complexity and more importantly, they do not have a holistic approach to the problem. Individuals engaging in bullying behaviors do so for diverse reasons. According to literature, the environment, the culture, the workload, past experiences or conflicts can all be conducive factors for workplace bullying. Strategies of prevention need therefore to address all these factors, and not focus just on conflict for example, or the organization culture. The approach that has a holistic view, or considers individuals as not just bodies, but souls and minds is the one that could help developers of workplace bullying prevention strategies address all the factors that are recognized to be the foundation of workplace bullying.

**Conclusion**

During my research, I discovered that much still needed to be done to create awareness among employers and employees to stop workplace bullying. Workplace bullying is not a topic of concern among human resource professionals, and the absence of bullying laws that could oblige employers to provide a bully-free environment in the United States of America explain the ignorance, and even negligence of this work phenomenon by human resource professionals. This research paper also revealed to me that workplace bullying is such a complex phenomenon
and as such cannot be addressed by the implementation of a specific strategy. As a complex issue, workplace bullying needs complex strategies to be done with.

This paper exposed me to the reality of workplace bullying, and to the fact that I could be a bully, or a victim of bullying behaviors. I had the opportunity to examine my behavior and attitudes towards my coworkers, and to understand that awareness needs to be created in organizations. Some individuals at work are bullied or bullies without even knowing it. I did not know that before this research that ignoring a colleague, or hiding some vital information from a coworker was a bullying behavior. In addition, I learned that one perception or understanding of workplace bullying could also be affected or caused by his/her culture. In other words, a behavior that is accepted in the United States, may not be accepted in France, or Australia, and therefore labeled as bullying behavior.

Nevertheless, my next step is to work on informing individuals on the subtlety, perverseness, and seriousness of workplace bullying. There is a need to put each one of us in the shoes of the colleague or coworker we despised, or treat badly at work, to know how s/he feels emotionally, or psychologically. We all need to be loved, valued, and this need transcends cultural differences. We shouldn’t display hatred and despise to others; this is the message I want to send out.
References


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