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Workplace Violence: The Bullying Factor

By Felix P. Nater

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A lot has been written about the workplace bully and so my approach will deal with the assessment and analytical process of workplace violence. During my years as a Postal Inspector on a Workplace Violence Interdiction Team in New York, I quickly gained an appreciation for the value of determining the "root causes" or "contributing factors" of incidents of Bullying and Bully Tactics. In all of the assessments conducted involving bullying behavior "root causes" and "contributing factors" enabled the investigative process to determine that in all cases the victim retaliated escalating the bullying to a physical altercation or threats of bodily harm. The bully created such an emotional response in his victim over time sufficiently enough to create a spontaneous response.

As such, I've come to define that Bullying is harassing, intimidating, offensive, degrading, demoralizing and humiliating to the victims: employee, co-workers and supervisors alike. The behavior was patterned, unfavorable, unwarranted and reasonably inappropriate for the workplace setting. While the individual Bully was obviously at fault, management for its failure to curb the behavior contributed to the hostility by creating a permissive environment that empowered the Bully. Sensing that he would not be sanctioned he acted with impunity. The unfortunate reality is that the Bully exist to fill a void; some thought his antics were funny; others relished in the abuse and banter; if it was racially or ethnically charged comments it had appeal to the bigots. As uncanny is it sounds most victims and witnesses interviewed after the fact were disgusted at knowing how long they were subjected to the abuse and how much they tolerated without intervention until the victim retaliated. It just happens over time like the diagnosis of cancer.

WHO ENGAGES IN BULLYING TACTICS?

- An employee
- Co-workers
- Customers and employees
- Employees and Clients
- Employees and Vendors
- Supervisors or manager

Workplace Violence: The Bullying Factor

During the many threat assessments conducted, I learned that Bullying is a form of workplace entertainment by some and an accepted part of the workplace culture by others. You the victim must be willing to resist the victimization and confront the individual to avoid the potential for escalation ultimately leading to the unfortunate spontaneous and subsequent consequences for engaging in a fight. It's easy to be intimidated by this behavior, it is designed to control you. However, don't blame yourself for being the victim of Bullying. Report the Bullying immediately! It should not be sanctioned and should be addressed under your company's Workplace Violence Prevention Policy.

WHAT CONTRIBUTES TO BULLYING?

Because Bullying is a pattern of abuse it must be dealt with immediately. The permissive environment

is the dwelling place of this type of behavior. That it might be part of an organization's culture is all the more reason for intervention. Left unabated, it creates the impression by the Bully that the culture condones it. Because employees are fearful of reporting the bully out of fear of retaliation, incidents go unreported. The lack of appropriate intervention by the supervisor or manager is especially the case when the employee is a good worker or a key individual in the business. The fact that the Bully is a supervisor or manager invokes fear and distrust in management's ability to curtail the threat sensing he would

be sealing his fate if he makes a complaint. This sort of response is common and often came out during the interviews of victims and witnesses.

I am reminded of an article I read entitled: "The Disruptive Clinician and the Impact on Patient Care", Lee G. Shanley, B.S., Director of Safety and Security Services at Nassau County Medical Center which appeared in the NCMC Proceedings Journal, fall 1996. He emphasizes the manipulative and controlling power superiors wield on the subordinates. He wrote, "Medical staff who continually act out in a disruptive manner towards visitors, patients and other staff members undermine the very fabric of the healthcare facility. When an individual displays verbal abuse, open or veiled hostility, or threatening actions towards associates, the result more often than not is compromised patient care...this abuse if not addressed, and allowed to continue unchecked, will more than likely lead to a major patient care error. As a result of the stress caused by the situation, associates and other healthcare providers may tend to avoid contact with the offending individual whenever possible."

Bullying behavior can range from subtle to more obvious behaviors. Here are some I've uncovered during the investigative process: name calling, innuendos, insults, offensive language, racial and sexual jokes, yelling and screaming, inappropriate comments about an individual's dress, life style, medical condition or general appearances, picking on family members, slander and belittling criticism, intentional isolation of an employee by the supervisor from normal interaction, training and career enhancement opportunities, overwork, unnecessary pressures, establishing impossible deadlines, making the person feel inadequate by reducing the workload, creating a feeling of uselessness and even hopelessness, undermines the work performance or effort, deliberately denying essential work-related information and data or even giving incorrect information, unexplained job changes, meaningless assignments or tasks beyond your skill level or ability, failure to give adequate acknowledgement or to recognize when due, tampering with your work products, reports, tools and equipment, teasing or regularly making you the brunt of pranks and practical jokes,

Workplace Violence: The Bullying Factor

intentional/unreasonable delays in processing requests for leave or vacation, requests for assignments, training or resolution of pay issues are but a few "root cause" or "contributing factors" which lead otherwise innocent victims to assault or threaten another in response to the Bullying (harassment, intimidation and abuse) Tactic.

THE EFFECTS OF BULLING ON THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE BUSINESS...

Managing the workplace environment is an ongoing process, which goes beyond the production and services responsibility of supervisors and managers. I found that supervisors who failed to control hostile behavior contributed to safety hazards, increased injury compensation claims, lost workdays due to increased absenteeism, poor morale and potential civil actions against the business and individual for creating a hostile environment.

On the other hand, I found that the victim employee including the supervisors suffer from increased stress levels, anxiety and panic attacks, complaints of loss of sleep, bad health, impaired ability to

make decisions, an incapacity to work, loss of confidence and self-esteem, reduced production, performance and efficiency, become accident prone and creates unsafe conditions as a result. In many cases the employee lost self-confidence and ability to cope in the workplace. Proper assessment and intervention is necessary if employees are to believe they will not become victims.

WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT THE BULLY?

- Document the activity when it happens if you are not willing to report or confront the individual at this point.
- Keep a record of the details of the type of activity and any potential witnesses for future reference.
- Report the behaviors to management at some point.
- Confront the Bully. Tell him/her you resent and object to the behavior.
- Ask the Bully to stop or you will report him.
- If you feel uncomfortable initiating contact go to your shop steward, supervisor or some other intermediary.
- Never internalize the behavior otherwise festering will occur causing you to retaliate in frustration or even worse, become ill as a result.

WHAT CAN MANAGEMENT DO TO HELP?

- If you don't have a Workplace Violence Crime Prevention Policy start working on one as soon as possible.
- If you have a Workplace Violence Crime Prevention Policy insure it addresses the Bullying Tactics and the Bully.
- Your policy should contain a caution statement on what the Bullying behavior is.
- Employees should receive periodic Workplace Violence Prevention Awareness Training.
- Supervisors should be trained in issues relating to managing the workplace environment and conflict resolution.
- Employees should be encouraged to report all incidents without attribution or retaliation.

Workplace Violence: The Bullying Factor

- Employees should be encouraged to pursue alternative means (shop steward/intermediary) to confront the Bully.
- Provide for conflict mediation and intervention by EAP and/or the Security Director.
- Conduct comprehensive Threat Assessments of each situation to prevent further escalation.
- Institute progressive disciplinary procedures to address the repeat or ongoing Bully.
- Create an environment where such behavior is not tolerated and will not be condoned.

When in doubt pick up the phone and call an expert or visit his website at www.naterassociates.com.

President of Nater Associates as security management consulting firm specializing in workplace security & workplace violence prevention. Felix retired as a postal inspector with 30 years experience.

Control Stress or It Will Control Your Business

By Dale Collie

When we think about stress in the workplace, we usually refer to ulcers or heart conditions, but stress has a much broader impact. It is known that stress is linked to cancer, lung ailments, cirrhosis of the liver, immunity to common illnesses, back problems, and many other medical problems.

It is estimated that stress is the underlying factor in 75 – 90% of all physician visits.

We see the effects of stress in workplace absenteeism, accidents, health care costs, workers comp, quality problems, productivity, litigation, grievances, violence, customer service complaints, resistance to change, personnel turnover, and profits.

Workplace stress is costing your business thousands of dollars per year. Is stress a line item on your budget? Knowing how much you are spending on stress is a good place to start, but you must take responsibility for stress control and its impact on the bottom line.

To receive a free article about the signs and symptoms of workplace stress, send a blank email to

. It's automatic.

If stress is such a problem, you might be asking questions such as:

++How much is stress costing our company each year?

++How can we find out the costs?

++How can we control stress to put this money back on the bottom line?

Controlling stress is beneficial on the bottom line and for employees who work hard to make the company successful.

Workplace Violence: The Bullying Factor

Dale Collie speaker, author, coach, and former US Army Ranger, corporate president, and teacher at West Point. Selected by "Fast Company" as one of America's Fast 50 innovative leaders. Author of "Frontline Leadership: From War Room to Boardroom," and "Winning Under Fire: Turn Stress into Success the US Army Way," (McGraw Hill).

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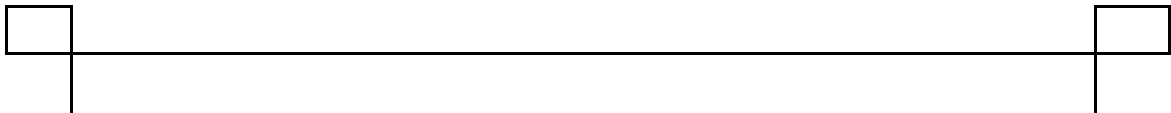
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