

The Hidden Costs of Bullying

As a manager or supervisor, you are responsible for providing a safe and productive environment for your subordinates. This means one of your responsibilities is to prevent bullying and harassment.

There are obvious ethical reasons for this: the inherent good of workplaces where employees treat each other with respect and common decency. But there are practical reasons for maintaining a safe and respectful environment, too. Bullying and harassment carry significant hidden costs, both to individuals and to their organizations.

Bullying damages morale and teamwork

Studies have shown that employees do their best work when they feel respected and cared about as individuals. They are more committed to their jobs, work more collaboratively, and get more done.

When you have a bully in your midst—or worse, if the general atmosphere in your workplace is antagonistic and overly competitive—communication becomes limited and “silos” form. Individuals protect themselves by not sharing important information. They avoid collaboration, not wanting to take a chance that others will be dismissive of their input. They are afraid to ask for information or assistance and try to go it alone, reducing the accuracy and quality of their work.

Instead of getting the best possible ideas, you get the safest ideas. Instead of making decisions based on all available information, you base your decisions on the limited information that people want you to hear. Problems are hidden and swept under the rug instead of being solved. The result: mediocre products, lost opportunities, lower customer satisfaction.



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Bullying interferes with productivity

It’s hard to get absorbed in a project if you’re coping with the mental drain caused by intimidation and worry. Stress also damages health and leads to increased absenteeism. Ultimately, targets of bullying may give up and resign, with resulting high turnover costs and even more stress for those who have to pick up the slack.

But what if you’re a manager who thinks it’s OK to mistreat underperforming or disliked subordinates in order to get them to leave? Even though this might seem to be a viable alternative, it’s not. There is a legal term for this: “constructive discharge.” And it can get you into real trouble. If you have a problem employee, it’s much better to deal with the issues head on, stating your expectations clearly and calmly, and using your discipline process. Bullying is never a substitute for good management.

Bullying tends to escalate over time

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of their behavior somehow “deserve what they’re getting.”

Whether bullies are managers or coworkers, once they discover they can get away with aggression and disrespect, the behavior is likely to get worse.

Bullies can grow to enjoy the feelings of power they get over others, and escalate their activities to get even more of that feeling. Colleagues or coworkers may even be recruited to join in.

Be part of the solution

As a manager, it is up to you to monitor your own leadership style and to keep an eye on your workgroup. Be aware of how people react to you, and watch what is going on between your employees. If you sense that there are unacceptable levels of stress, conflict or disruption, it’s important to step in early rather than late. It’s easier to stop negative attitudes and habits when they are just getting started—much more difficult after they have become entrenched.