

# The cost of incivility

How workplace bullies negatively impact a company's culture **Interviewed by Meredith McKenzie**

**B**ullies are not just on the playground anymore, as bullying in the workplace has become a growing problem. Research shows that about 37 percent of the work force has been bullied, with about 75 percent of that bullying done by bosses.

"Bully bosses cause all sorts of problems," says James Burton, assistant professor of management at Northern Illinois University. "They cost organizations across the U.S. an estimated \$24 billion a year due to the resulting lost productivity, absenteeism and tardiness among their employees."

Workplace bullying can also lead to stress, depression and lower self-esteem. And bullied employees may continue the cycle by bullying peers, or even their spouses and children.

*Smart Business* spoke with Burton about bullying in the workplace and how to stop the spiral of incivility.

## What is workplace bullying, and how does it differ from being assertive or aggressive in the workplace?

The big difference is that it is a sustained process. For example, you may have a bad day and act out against subordinates or peers. But that's not bullying — you're just in a bad mood on a particular day and may become too aggressive.

Bullying is a prolonged and sustained display of hostile behaviors, such as demeaning employees, belittling people and undermining others on an ongoing basis. It's not a one-time event but something that goes on for a while.

Research has shown that when someone is bullied at work, that person is more likely to bully others. Therefore, the behavior of bully bosses can lead to a spiral of incivility that spreads throughout the organization. This spiral of incivility can even make its way to the employee's home.

## What are the drivers of bullying?

While the research has demonstrated that perceptions of unfairness or stress can lead to bullying, the biggest drivers are the culture, values and systems that are in place at work. It may be fine for some companies to have an aggressive culture; for example, Microsoft is known for its aggressive culture, and that's not necessarily a bad thing. However, there must be limits.



**James Burton**  
Assistant professor of management  
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Unchecked, an aggressive culture can spiral out of control.

For example, if your boss is not punished for bullying you, you may perceive it to be fine to bully others with the belief that the behavior won't be punished or may even be expected. So bullying starts to spread throughout the organization and becomes part of the culture and expected behavior for the employees.

While some may argue that you can stop bullying by hiring the 'right person,' there are no personality traits that point toward bullying because anyone can become a bully. Even if you're the nicest person, you might tend to adopt bullying characteristics if that type of culture is in place at your company.

## How can an employer develop a culture that discourages bullying?

The key is to punish those who are causing problems. You need to make sure that management will reprimand bullying when it occurs so others know that it is not acceptable.

This sets the values that the company stands for. Employees are unlikely to begin bullying when they see their peers being punished for that behavior.

You should also look at the people you

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promote. Many times, the aggressive folks are the ones who can get the work done and they are the ones who are promoted. Other employees see that and believe that you need to bully in order to be promoted.

You also may want to develop formal policies against bullying in the workplace. There is a growing trend among many organizations, for example, Barclays Capital, Berkshire Hathaway, to adopt a 'no jerks' policy where employees are expected to treat others with dignity and respect. This then becomes part of the values and culture of the organization.

In a sense, you see a spiral of civility rather than incivility.

## What should an employee do if he or she has been a victim of workplace bullying?

The worst thing to do is retaliate, especially if the bullying is being done by an immediate supervisor. The employee doesn't have the same power and might face severe punishment. Instead, an employee should talk with a human resources professional to find out the company's policies against workplace abuse and bullying, the definitions of bullying and if his or her experience matches that definition.

If it gets to be an extreme problem, an employee can seek legal counsel, but there are currently no laws against workplace bullying. However, if that bullying crosses over into harassment, there may be legal resources.

## What are the benefits of preventing workplace bullying?

You create a climate and culture of trust and respect and have employees who are not psychologically damaged in terms of depression and low self-esteem. Employees will be more productive and focused on the job if you're treating them with dignity and respect, and not bullying them.

Preventing bullying can also preserve the reputation of your company. There are many blogs on the Internet for employees to discuss bullying bosses and organizations, and the last thing you want as an employer is to get a reputation as a bullying organization, because then you won't be able to attract the best and brightest employees. <<

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