Workplace Cyberbullying
Employee Harassment in the Digital Age

By Raquelle Solon

I n our culture, it can be easy to fall into a mind-set that associates "bullying" with school-children. Bullies pull pigtails, shoot spit-balls, and terrorize the play-ground. Bullying, however, is a behavior applicable to any age, and can also harmful effects on adults. Health issues, psychological concerns, and diminished productivity all result from an adult bullying situation, damaging both the victim and his or her friends and colleagues.

Bullying can be especially destructive in the workplace, as victims are often forced to interact with their harassers. In addition, while the "bully boss" in which harassment can occur both from the top down and bottom up, the most common type of workplace bullying is actually lateral, peer-to-peer harassment. Moreover, a new threat has emerged as well, one that is challenging to fight and carries potential for significant hurt: *Cyberbullying*.

Inadmissible as simply "business culture," cyberbullying is disruptive and damaging to workplace relationships, productivity, and an organization's bottom line. It's up to business leaders to use whatever resources are available, including an EAP, to put an end to cyberbullying in the workplace and create a safe, respectful environment where employees at all levels can produce their best work.

Understanding Cyberbullying

According to the U.S. Department of Justice, bullying is a form of abuse involving repeated acts over time that attempt to create or enforce one person's power over another, thus creating an "imbalance of power." Cyberbullying is bullying—repeated incidents intended to cause harm—that occurs via an electronic medium. It can happen in various, direct ways through devices such as smartphones, computers, game systems or tablets, taking advantage of the instantaneous communications landscape of instant messaging, emails, and social media. It also can occur in group chat forums or through conversations during online gaming.

Cyberbullies use these outlets to create posts or send nasty, harmful, demeaning, and false information that causes the intended target humiliation, embarrassment, and psychological or emotional injury.

The Effects of Cyberbullying

Even though cyberbullying takes place in a virtual realm, the

effects on employees are all too real. Targets of workplace cyberbullying can experience negative stress, giving rise to increased adrenaline and cortisol levels: the harassment affects not only psychological health, but physical health as well. Physical effects may include anxiety, depression, headaches, sleep problems, and concentration issues. Employees struggling with health issues are more likely to be less productive or completely absent from work, costing the organization in terms of medical expenses and reducing this employee's productivity, and thus his or her contribution to the bottom line.

Few things on the Internet are truly and exclusively private, so it's plausible that workplace cyberbullying also can damage an organization's reputation. Employees are representatives of their places of employment; harassing other employees, clients or customers in a public setting paints the organization in a negative light. This kind of behavior might even deter prospective employees from applying, or cause current employees to worry that they might be targeted next.

Failing to proactively address cyberbullying can be as damaging to employee morale as the act of harassment itself. If targets feel they are getting nowhere with complaints against workplace bullies, they will be more likely to leave the organization than to "tough it out." The cost of recruiting, hiring, and training new employees far eclipses the cost of setting up effective measures for dealing with cyberbullying. Stopping harassment quickly and effectively can help maintain loyalty between employee and employer.

Taking Action

Putting a halt to cyberbullying means taking action well before it happens. Organizations must implement clear policies and procedures for effectively addressing cyberbullying. In turn, management can establish, explain, and model such policies for employees, demonstrating that cyberbullying is taken seriously and that targets will have a safe way to report and end harassment.

Management also should create a clear reporting process where employees can report cyberbullying, and are guaranteed timely and appropriate follow-up. Employees should further be trained to recognize bullying and cyberbullying, clarifying and demonstrating behavior that is not tolerated in the workplace, and employees should be able to look to their supervisors for good examples of proper workplace behavior, both digitally and in-person.

Beyond just policies and procedures, organizations can develop a code of conduct for *all* employees. Codes of conduct specify proper ways to act around co-workers as well as customers and clients. Invite

employees to provide feedback on how they think workplace etiquette should look when developing this code. (The EAP is in a perfect position to help.)

Preventative measures are a great step in the fight against workplace cyberbullying, but establishing proper policies and culture can accomplish only so much. *One of the most important resources for a target of active cyberbullying is an organization's EAP.*

Employee Assistance in the Face of Cyberbullying

A comprehensive EAP can offer victims of cyberbullying short-term counseling to help work through the negative feelings and stress caused by harassment. Employees are able to discreetly see a trained professional and navigate some of the immediate effects of hurtful or traumatic cyberbullying. The EAP will also have the ability to set up a toll-free "hotline" number whereby employees can discretely and anonymously report bullying behavior.

Everyone within an organization has the power and responsibility to stop workplace bullying. Whether it is the target or a bystander, whoever experiences (or witnesses) the behavior should follow organizational policies to address it. The first step is telling the bully the behavior is unwanted. Next steps include documenting and reporting incidents to the appropriate channels, as well as seeking support through your EAP. Much more than schoolyard taunts, this kind of harassment has lasting physical and psychological effects on employees and should not be written off as "teasing," "breaking in the new guy" or "a rite of passage."

Summary

Organizations are responsible for developing policies and procedures that will help prevent bullying and address concerns, including the use of EAPs. Proactive action against bullying will improve workplace morale, keep productivity high and create a safe, stable culture that allows all employees to work effectively. ∎

Raquelle, business solutions engineer for **FEI Behavioral Health** *in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, is responsible for helping organizations in a wide range of industries, including retail, higher education, business, manufacturing, healthcare, mental health, and human services, determine and implement a holistic crisis management system. She is also respon-sible for delivering workplace violence prevention, leadership development, and crisis management trainings. Raquelle is experienced in reviewing current training and policies and procedures to identify gaps and work with clients towards a solution. She has a bachelor's degree in business management and communication from Concordia University Wisconsin, where she is working toward her master's degree in international business.*

FEI has a 35-year history in enhancing workforce resiliency by offering a full spectrum of solutions, from EAP and organizational development to workplace violence prevention and crisis management. One of the most successful social enterprises in America, FEI was created by the **Alliance for Strong Families and Communities**, *a national network of social sector organizations working to achieve its vision of healthy and equitable society. Visit www.feinet.com for additional information.*