

Bullying Victims Come in Many Shapes and Sizes



There are stereotypes about what bullies'both workplace and schoolyard'and their victims are typically like. If I described a worker as a 6'5' man in his 20s weighing more than 300 lbs and with the nickname 'Moose,' would you assume he was a bully or a bullying victim'

I bet most people would say bully. But according to allegations currently under investigation in the US, the man I described claims he was the victim of workplace bullying.

I'm, of course, referring to Miami Dolphins offensive lineman Jonathan Martin, who left the team after claiming he was harassed and bullied by teammates, particularly fellow lineman Richie Incognito.

The alleged bullying behavior included:

- Being forced to pay \$15,000 towards a trip to Las Vegas that he didn't attend
- Getting threatening and racially charged texts from Incognito
- Being invited by teammates to sit at their lunch table and then when Martin sat down, the others all got up and left
- Being subjected to physical intimidation and threats of violence against him and his family.

Whether the coaches and members of management were aware of what has happening in the locker room and elsewhere is unclear. There have been some claims that Martin was ordered to 'toughen up.' Incognito had simply went too far. So whether this behaviour was officially sanctioned by management or just allowed to take place has yet to be determined.

In response to Martin's claims, some teammates have indicated surprise, saying anything that went on was typical locker room hijinks and all in fun. (Sounds

like the 'boys will be boys' defence, doesn't it')

The Dolphins and the NFL are investigating Martin's claims. He voluntarily left the team and isn't expected to return, claiming the team permitted an unsafe work environment. The Dolphins suspended Incognito.

Until these investigations are complete, we won't know the whole story. But there are a few lessons all employers can learn from the situation even at this stage:

- Bullies and their victims come in all shapes and sizes. Throw any stereotypes out the window. Bullying is about an imbalance of power that results in physical and/or emotional abuse. In other words, the little, nerdy guy'or girl'who uses his authority to torment those he supervises is as much of a bully as the big guy who physically pushes people around.
- So-called 'hazing,' particularly of rookies, seems to be the norm in NFL locker rooms. Maybe what occurred on the Dolphins crossed the line. But this culture of acceptable abuse of co-workers enables bullies and makes it hard for victims to come forward without seeming weak or being perceived as not fitting into the workplace. That's why employers must be aware of the culture within their workplaces and ensure that it provides a safe environment'both physically and emotionally'for all workers.

Go to the OHS Insider's Workplace Violence Compliance Centre for information, tools and resources on workplace bullying, violence and harassment, including:

- WorkSafeBC's new bullying and harassment policies, which just took effect Nov. 1
- The impact of bullying on bystanders
- The costs of permitting workplace bullies
- How common workplace bullying is in Canada
- Information on why employers can't tolerate bullying
- A workplace violence infographic.