

Impact of Bullying Extends Beyond Immediate Victims



It's no surprise that the immediate victims of a workplace bully are negatively impacted by this behaviour. But a new study on abusive bosses found that bullying can have a ripple effect, harming co-workers of the direct victims as well.

Researchers from the University of New Hampshire, Indiana University Southeast and New Mexico State University conducted the first study on vicarious supervisory abuse. 'An Investigation of Abusive Supervision, Vicarious Abuse Supervision, and Their Joint Impacts' was presented in the *Journal of Social Psychology*.

The researchers surveyed a sample of 233 people who work in a wide range of jobs in the southeastern US about supervisory abuse, 'vicarious supervisory abuse,' job frustration, perceived organizational support and co-worker abuse. The respondents were:

- 46% men
- 86% white
- An average age of 42.6
- Had worked in their job for seven years and at their company for 10 years
- Worked an average of 46 hours a week.

Abusive supervision is considered a dysfunctional type of leadership and includes a sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviours toward subordinates.

Vicarious supervisory abuse is defined as the observation or awareness of a supervisor abusing a co-worker. *Examples:* hearing rumors of abusive behavior from co-workers, reading about such behaviors in an email or actually witnessing the abuse of a colleague.

The researchers found that both personally experienced and vicarious bullying have negative impacts and these effects are heightened when both forms of abusive supervision are present. The negative impacts include:

- Greater job frustration
- Tendency to abuse other co-workers
- A lack of perceived organizational support.

The researchers noted that 'when vicarious abusive supervision is present, employees realize that the organization is allowing this negative treatment to exist, even if they are not experiencing it directly.'

In addition, the negative effects from either type of abuse were intensified if the co-worker was a victim of both kinds of supervisory abuse.

Bottom line: Abusive bosses who target workers with ridicule, public criticism and the silent treatment have a detrimental effect on not only the workers they bully, but also the work environment for co-workers who suffer from 'second-hand' abuse.

Researcher Paul Harvey, associate professor of organizational behavior at UNH said, 'Although the effects of abusive supervision may not be as physically harmful as other types of dysfunctional behavior, such as workplace violence or aggression, the actions are likely to leave longer-lasting wounds, in part, because abusive supervision can continue for a long time.'

5 Tips for Bullying Bystanders

What can co-workers do when they see a supervisor bullying a co-worker? A booklet on workplace bullying from the Public Services Health and Safety Association has these five tips:

1. Stand by a bullied co-worker immediately after an attack. For example, go up to her or him right after a closed-door session that leaves your co-worker obviously shaken.
2. Refuse to betray your co-worker when the bully boss tells you to as part of the 'divide and conquer' game. Siding with the bully brings short-term immunity but at an ethical cost. How can you have integrity if you stand by and watch a co-worker being mistreated?
3. Sit in on meetings with the bullying manager as a witness. Witnesses can temper the most outrageous bullies because they're careful to not show their tactics in public for fear of exposure.
4. Provide in-person testimony or submit a written statement at hearings, arbitrations and mediation sessions on the bullying.
5. Gather the group when a co-worker is being bullied'even if behind closed doors'and invoke what operating room nurses call Code Pink. Circle the bully as a unified group, telling her or him to stop and making it clear that the outrageous tactics are unacceptable and unprofessional. Threaten to stop all productive work if the bully doesn't stop attacking the targeted person or attempts to attack anyone else in the group.

OHS Insider Resources

Go to the OHS Insider's Workplace Violence Compliance Centre for information, tools and resources on workplace bullying and other forms of workplace violence

and harassment, such as:

- WorkSafeBC's new bullying and harassment policies
- 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.

And you can go to Safety Smart for safety talks on not letting bullying poison the workplace and coping with workplace bullies. Not a subscriber to SafetySmart? Sign up for a free trial.