

Managing Bullying in the Workplace

Workplace bullying refers to persistent behaviors or comments that humiliate, intimidate, or degrade an employee or leader. On a continuum, bullying is the highest act of disrespect and can escalate to work place violence. As a manager, you may be one of the last to know if there is bullying on your team because those who are targeted by bullies are often reluctant to share concerns. Bullies may attempt to remain under the radar by directing undesirable behaviors at coworkers or direct reports while simultaneously charming upper levels of management.

Bullies can even be star performers who do well on the job, so it is important to also factor in feedback from all levels of employees and leadership if bullying concerns are raised in the workplace. Bullying behaviors are persistent and can affect the team/department if allowed to continue. Bullying ultimately costs time, profit, and morale when employees are dissatisfied and feeling unsafe. Bullied employees are more likely to miss work. Bullied employees, and those witnessing the bullying, are less able to focus on work because of the distraction and preoccupation, and the resulting “tension” present in the workplace.

Your role as a manager is filled with multiple demands on your time and attention, but prioritizing a positive work environment can benefit you, your team, and the organization. Setting the professional standard with your own behavior, paying attention to how employees interact with each other, and addressing problematic behaviors early on help build a healthy work environment. A positive work culture helps you succeed in your goals because your team/department will be more focused, motivated, productive, and engaged.

Organizational Factors in Bullying

When management is in a remote location or not visible and immediately accessible at work, it can sometimes set the stage for problematic behavior to occur. Changes, such as restructuring or downsizing, can also bring uncertainty and insecurity, prompting some employees to act out toward others. When bullying occurs under these circumstances, it is often a case of the bully striking out to protect his or her own job, resources, and/or livelihood. The bully perceives the target as threatening some aspect of his/her employment and may lash out toward competition.

Change can be difficult to cope with and a bully may try to get away with an escalation of behaviors upon transition to a new manager or supervisor. Bullying is not just an isolated people problem or a personality conflict between colleagues. In any situation where a bullying concern is raised, managers should act quickly and decisively to partner with helpful resources to investigate the situation and take appropriate corrective action when required.

Bullying Backdrop

Bullying may involve more than just the bully and target. There may be witnesses to what is happening and sometimes colleagues may take sides. The culture of a workplace is defined by its values, beliefs, and what is accepted as normal behavior. When there is a positive work culture, employees are more likely to demonstrate respect for each other.

Bullying can thrive in environments where the troublesome behaviors are not addressed. The message that bullying will not be tolerated can be clearly delivered through consistent management and quick and decisive corrective action when necessary.

Bullying is Bad for Business

There are direct and indirect costs to an organization if bullying behavior goes unchecked. A bully can cause a drop in productivity by spending time and effort targeting a coworker while the target then spends time fending off the bad behavior. Bullying behavior can contribute to increased absenteeism and on-the-job accidents. Hidden costs that must also be considered include the effect on team member morale, commitment to the organization, and reputational risk if the word gets out that bullying is tolerated within an organization.

Moving Targets, Bullies Remain

The majority of those who have been bullied do not tell their employer. If a bully's target leaves the organization without the bully being identified, the bully is likely to find a replacement to mistreat. A target is often isolated and ashamed about what is happening and may not come forward to discover that the bully has targeted other coworkers.

Tips for Managers

- If an employee tells you about bullying, pay attention.
- Remain aware of work dynamics and environment.
- Clarify concerns from the targeted employee.
- Identify specific and observable behaviors: who, what, where, when and how.
- Be present and available.
- Develop and present clear behavioral expectations to the bully.
- Use performance management to document behaviors of concern (and escalate the discipline as appropriate) as bullying is identified as one type of unprofessional and inappropriate behavior.
- Monitor the situation closely.
- Consult with Human Resources, Labor Relations, and/or Employee Assistance Program.
- Notify Security if there is threatening behavior.
- Refer team members to EAP for resources and support.

Help is Available

The Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is here to support and work with you in your leadership role when your group undergoes significant change, behavioral issues or a crisis. We are experts in individual and organizational behavioral health, and as internal business partners, we understand the unique needs, culture, and assets of Kaiser Permanente.

To make an appointment with an EAP Coordinator, please visit our website:

insidekp.kp.org/eap