

Bullied workers fighting back

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Picture a bully and you'll probably picture the schoolyard variety -- or those junior citizens of the year captured on cellphone footage "swarming" or "happy slapping" their prey.

But what happens when schoolyard bullies grow up? Too many, it seems, become the "toxic bosses" and bullies of the workplace.

Unfortunately, the conventional wisdom has been that unlike schoolyard bullies, the "Great Intimidators" of the workplace "get things done." For all the lip service given to empathetic, encouraging managers, too often it's workplace bullies who are rewarded and protected.

According to the Canadian Safety Council, bullying at work is three times more common than sexual harassment. One in three people experiences it and 82 per cent of those eventually quit their jobs.

The primary targets are conscientious, well-established employees -- usually women in their 40s (although men are less likely to report incidents). In 71 per cent of cases, workplace bullies are in a position of authority. They consider themselves invaluable to the organization and safe within it, but generally have low self-esteem and want their actions to go undetected.

In turn, bullied employees -- often "positive agents of change" -- are perceived as threats. Typically, they are confused, even in denial, about being bullied and don't return the aggression. Ultimately, however, they tend to become insecure and unproductive, and often quit. This "flight of talent" is becoming a costly problem for businesses and institutions.

But the tide may be turning. Canadian judges have started to hold employers responsible if employees in their organizations are bullied to the point that they become ill or quit.

In 2006, in a "constructive dismissal" case in B.C., a female police officer, Nancy Sulz, won nearly \$1 million from the RCMP. The problems started when Sulz asked her superior, Donald Smith, to help find some files. "Open your f--g eyes," he replied. As friction between them escalated, Smith poisoned co-workers against her and soon ignored her altogether. Sulz lost weight, suffered depression and felt terrified to come to work. The judge held that Smith had a duty to ensure a "harassment-free environment."

Governments are also taking action. In 2004, Quebec became the first place in North America to outlaw bullying at work. In the past three years, some 7,000 Quebecers -- not including unionized employees, who have a separate grievance procedure -- have filed complaints. More than one-third of those cases were considered serious enough to proceed to a mediator, and another 434 cases went on to the labour relations board, which has the power to make employers reinstate employees, pay lost wages and even levy fines.

Last October, Saskatchewan followed suit. A new provincial amendment to the Occupational Health and Safety Act outlaws psychological harassment of workers that would humiliate or intimidate a "reasonable person." Such conduct might include verbal or written harassment, offensive jokes and gestures or "serial meanness" that interfere

with someone's ability to do his or her job.

Timely, therefore, was the forum last week on workplace bullying and harassment, sponsored by the Saskatoon BPW (Business and Professional Women) organization. The panel featured four women (one of whom is employed by the City of Saskatoon, the other three by the University of Saskatchewan) who related the devastating personal effects that bullying has had on their lives and careers.

"Bullying is insidious," said one. "It ranges from exclusion, rumours and behind-the-scenes scheming, to physical intimidation and verbal abuse."

Combatting it can involve years of mediation, arbitration and even court proceedings -- not to mention debts and depression. Too often, the result is a legal and procedural quagmire. "There's a massive disconnect between what the legislation says and what really happens," said another speaker. "Why does arbitration take six or seven years? Where's the ombudsman?"

Most of us have encountered a toxic co-worker or boss at some point. But we shouldn't have to. Work is a vital part of one's identity and self-worth, which can be shaped -- or shattered -- by workplace conditions.

Expanding the law is a start. But until we finally recognize bullying as the deviant pathology it is -- and stigmatize it as a societal outrage -- its gratuitous cruelty will continue to be perpetrated not only in workplaces but also in places such as sports venues, seniors' homes and schoolyards.

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