



# Workplace bullies

Stop them before they wreak  
havoc on employee health,  
morale and productivity

**Scene 1:** On a Friday afternoon in a government office, an employee finds a mock bullet on his desk, accompanied by a simple note that reads, “This one’s for you.”

**Scene 2:** An employee is denied promotions and deprived of adequate working conditions even though her performance is excellent. Her manager neglects to send her important e-mails and does not invite her to staff meetings.

**Scene 3:** A senior manager yells at selected staff members in public during a conference call, telling them they are “stupid.”

WHICH OF THESE REAL-LIFE SCENARIOS would qualify as workplace violence? As the term is understood today, all of the above. In recent years, the definition of workplace violence has expanded from physical acts like assault or sexual molestation, to include an array of behaviours that undermine the victim’s psychological well-being.

In its 2008 manual titled *Violence in the Workplace Prevention Guide*, the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS) defines workplace violence as “any act in which a person is abused, threatened, intimidated or assaulted in his or her employment.” Listing rumours, pranks and verbal abuse among the various forms of workplace violence, the manual also notes that work-related violence can also include acts that occur away from work, such as making a threatening phone call to an employee’s home.

The ever-broadening definition of workplace violence has arguably made the workplace safer for employees, but the lack of consistent and clearly defined legislation across the country leaves many employers on uncertain terrain, says Glenn French, president and CEO of the Canadian Initiative on Workplace Violence, a Toronto-based social research firm established in 1998. “What is offensive?” French asks rhetorically. “Not being spoken to in the morning? Not being invited to the staff Christmas party? That’s why workplace violence is such a difficult problem to address. Abuse means different things to different people.”

by Gabrielle Bauer



### Scope of the problem

Not that the problem is rare. A 2007 Statistics Canada report called *Criminal Victimization in the Workplace*, based on a survey of about 24,000 households, found that 17% of incidents of sexual assault, robbery and physical assault occurred in respondents' places of work. This represents more than 356,000 violent workplace incidents in Canada's 10 provinces.

And that's just the tip of the iceberg, says Dr. Sandy Hershcovis, a business researcher at the University of Manitoba. An estimated 41% of U.S. residents have experienced some form of psychological violence at work, she says—a figure that probably reflects the Canadian scene as well. "This can include such behaviours as being ignored, belittled or ostracized, having someone spread rumours about you, or purposely thwart your work efforts," she says.

Both physical and psychological violence occur more commonly in certain sectors, such as social services, education, retail, and especially healthcare. The recent *National Survey of Work and Health of Nurses* found that 29% of nurses had experienced physical aggression, and 40% emotional abuse, over the previous 12 months. The perpetrators? "Usually the patients un-

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der the nurses' care," says Dr. Michael Kerr, associate professor in the Arthur Labatt Family School of Nursing at the University of Western Ontario. Needless to say, "this creates tension for already overloaded nurses," he says. "In a nurturing profession such as nursing, it can be especially upsetting to have a patient lash out at you, even if you know it's not the patient's fault."

Most disturbing to Joanna Stefan, a trauma specialist at human resources solutions provider Ceridian Canada, is the research suggesting that psychological aggression has crept up in recent years, particularly in women. "More women are acting as aggressors—usually of the covert, relational type—than before," she notes. That said, "psychological violence crosses all gender and race lines, and chronically stressful work environments tend to lower the threshold for this type of behaviour."

### It's the law

The Human Rights Code protects all Canadian residents from discrimination resulting from race, religion, age, sex, and physical or mental disabilities, among others. If an individual can demonstrate that psychological violence stems from one

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of these prohibited grounds, the Code may apply. When the violence originates from relational problems, such as personality conflicts or jealousy, it falls outside the scope of the Code. In fact, such emotional aggression is not illegal except in Quebec and Saskatchewan, says Hershcovis.

Times are changing, though. In June 2008, Canada's minister of labour announced the arrival of new regulations to prevent violence—including bullying, teasing or abusive behaviour—in federally regulated workplaces. Under the new regulations, employers must develop a policy to prevent workplace violence and provide training for potential victims and perpetrators.

"The law has been moving toward the recognition that psychological aggression makes workplaces unsafe," says Toronto employment lawyer Garry J. Wise. This paradigm shift plays into the requirement, under provincial occupational health and safety acts, to provide a safe workplace, he says. "Once you recognize psychological violence as a safety issue, you have more channels for getting redress for this type of violence."

What about intent? In a court of law, a plaintiff may be required to demonstrate "intentional infliction of nervous shock," says Wise. Some individuals have successfully advanced this argument in recent trials. In the 2002 *Prinzo vs. Baycrest Centre for Geriatric Care* case, for example, Ontario's Court of Appeal traced Ms. Iole Prinzo's emotional and physical symptoms to deliberate psycho-

logical harassment and awarded her \$15,000 in damages.

From an occupational health standpoint, intent carries less weight. "The employer's duty to maintain safety trumps the duty to let a perpetrator off the hook because of, say, medical conditions that may predispose him or her to aggression," Wise explains. "An employee may be entitled to refuse to come to work if psychological violence, whether intended or not, is causing genuine feelings of unsafety."

### Ripple effect

It's not only a sense of safety that victims lose—their health can also suffer. John Yardley, president of Metrics@Work, a St. Catharines, Ont., research and consulting centre affiliated with Brock University, says that "chronic psychological aggression can compromise victims' health." The key word is chronic. "You can brush off the occasional hurtful comment, particularly if it is out of character for the person who made it," says Yardley. "If it's an everyday thing, the stress starts to get to you." Depending on the individual, the stress may express itself as stomach pains, tension headaches, anxiety, or outright depression.

Evidently, the old schoolyard expression "sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me" does not travel well to the workplace. If anything, it's the opposite. "Typically, an act of physical aggression occurs at a specific point in

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time,” notes Edmond Mellina, president of Transitus Inc., a Toronto-based learning and consulting firm. By contrast, “bullying and other forms of emotional aggression can go on for weeks, months or even years. Slowly but steadily, it erodes people’s morale and engagement.”

Just how much damage can bullying cause? A new Canadian study co-led by Hershcovis and Dr. Julian Barling at Queen’s University found that bullied employees experienced more stress, anger, and anxiety than those subjected to sexual harassment. Possible reasons: “For one thing, sexual harassment is clearly against the law, so victims know they can do something about it. That sense of control may be empowering,” says Hershcovis. What’s more, “sexual harassment is more of a statement against an entire group—in this case, women—while bullying feels more like a personal affront.”

Psychological aggression shakes up not only victims’ lives, but the organization’s bottom line. “Most victims work less effectively and eventually quit,” says Hershcovis. Thus, “organizations

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### Sussing out suspects

Workplace aggressors come in many packages, making them difficult to identify. “There’s no consistent profile for perpetrators of psychological violence,” says University of Manitoba business researcher Dr. Sandy Hershcovis. For this reason, “most researchers don’t advise using specific screening tests for bullying.”

A further challenge: psychological aggression often occurs under the radar, so that “nobody but the aggressor and victim realize what’s going on,” says Edmond Mellina, president of the Toronto learning and consulting firm Transitus Inc. Armed with this awareness, employers can “watch for a pattern of subtly negative comments directed at a specific person,” he says. “Such comments may indicate psychological aggression.” Other traits to look for: “people who micromanage and criticize publicly.”

Don’t assume the bully is a supervisor, though. “People talk a lot about bully bosses, but bullying among co-workers is more common,” says St. Catharines, Ont.-based Metrics@Work president John Yardley, who advises employers to look for “the hidden power differential that often exists between two co-workers, even if they’re officially on the same rung of the ladder.”

Best of all is not to hire potential aggressors in the first place. “People are good at hiding this aspect of themselves,” notes Yardley. To counteract this phenomenon, “the hiring process should feature multiple interviews, background checks and, where possible, an explicit job requirement to work collaboratively that can be used to justify termination beyond a probationary term.” By the same token, “performance appraisals should include feedback about interactions with other people.”

can incur significant costs due to loss of productivity, increased absenteeism, higher turnover, and extra training.” Worst of all, “aggression begets aggression, which can set a vicious circle in motion.”

### Effective interventions

According to Hershcovis, effective management of workplace violence begins with a written policy that makes it plain such violence won’t be tolerated. A zero-tolerance policy must include the following components,

she says: “A clear definition of aggression, steps to take for the victim, a description of how the incident will be investigated, and punitive measures for the perpetrator if found guilty.” Of course, “all employees must be made aware of the policy.”

Mike Lee, vice president of human resources at St. John, N.B.-based Moosehead Breweries, says his company currently relies on its harassment policy, which states clearly that “verbal, sexual and physical abuse are prohibited and that perpetrators will be disciplined.” Like many other companies, Moosehead sees the need to address bullying—which technically doesn’t qualify as harassment—more specifically. “We’ve hired someone from an outside organization to help us draft a bullying policy,” says Lee. “She’s given us many new thoughts to consider.”

In tandem with a policy, Hershcovis urges employers to train their staff to recognize aggression, much as “today’s teachers and principals teach students how to spot bullying in the schoolyard.” For instance, “making people aware that gossiping is a form of aggression could help some individuals find the courage to say they don’t feel comfortable badmouthing a co-worker, which would likely reduce such behaviours significantly.”

In the healthcare field, employees can be trained to defuse tension from aggressive patients, says Kerr. To this end, the Continuing Gerontological Education Cooperative in Hamilton has developed a formal program called the Gentle Persuasive Approaches in Dementia Care. The program teaches staff how to communicate in a calming manner, and how to respond respectfully and confidently to challenging patient behaviours.

Of course, not all aggression can be managed in the trenches. Employers need to establish formal reporting channels that allow victims to come forward discreetly and professionally, says Yardley. “The go-to person could be an internal ombudsperson, employee assistance counsellor or trusted HR person,” he says. And let’s not forget the perpetrator. “Interventions like sensitivity training or one-on-one counselling may prevent them from falling back on their old behaviours.” If the offensive behaviour persists, however, “The company must take action and have the perpetrator removed.” ■

Gabrielle Bauer is a freelance writer in Toronto