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BY PAUL LAGASSE

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Usually part of a clique,

they ignore or exclude others from the group and never hesitate to spread malicious gossip at every opportunity. Some are simply dismissive, while others, given the chance, resort to verbal abuse, psychological and physical intimidation and harsh criticism. This is not the cruelty that children and young adults inflict on one another with regrettably greater frequency. It is the behavior of adults in the workplace—bullies whose actions have dire consequences not only for the victims but for their organizations as well.

Indeed, workplace bullying has a very real and measurable impact on an organization's long-term health. It can lead to lowered morale, increased workplace stress and depression, greater employee dissatisfaction and a decrease in productivity, all of which can ultimately lead to higher-than-normal levels of unnecessary staff turnover. >>

How to ensure workplace bullying

does not deprive your organization
of valuable staff, its reputation—
and its revenue



Workplace Bullying

A common misconception about workplace bullying, which the Society for Human Resources Management (www.shrm.org) in Alexandria, Va., defines as any “persistent, offensive, abusive, intimidating or insulting behavior or unfair actions directed at another individual, causing the recipient to feel threatened, abused, humiliated or vulnerable,” is that it is confined to the private sector. After all, the theory goes, aggressive behavior is more likely to be condoned as a way to get ahead in one’s career or improve a company’s quarterly performance. Surely, organizations that are dedicated to the greater social good are by their very nature immune to bullying.

Not necessarily so, says Sean Lunsford, a consultant and educator with the Workplace Bullying Institute (WBI) (www.workplacebullying.org) in Bellingham, Wash. “One would like to think the prosocial aspects of employment in the nonprofit sector would cause malevolent individuals to self-screen out of charitable industries,” he says. “However, all organizations are capable of harboring bullies. Even if the strength of the mission and the values of the individual worker start high, the presence of antagonists will ultimately undermine those strong motivating factors and bring the organization to its knees.”

Lunsford notes that, while WBI does not break its data down by sector and so cannot say for certain whether workplace bullying happens with greater or lesser frequency in nonprofits, in its surveys 35 percent of survey respondents reported that they experienced or are experiencing workplace bullying. Another 15 percent reported having witnessed bullying in the workplace. “That translates to an estimated 53.5 million Americans being bullied,” Lunsford says, “and some of those individuals are bound to work at nonprofits.”

For Nonprofits, Workplace Bullying Matters

Anecdotal evidence suggests nonprofits may be particularly vulnerable to workplace bullying. In a 2011 article on *Minding the Workplace*, the blog of the New Workplace Institute at Suffolk University Law School in Boston, David C. Yamada, professor of law and director of the New Workplace Institute, identified five characteristics of nonprofits in his article “Workplace Bullying in the Nonprofit Sector” that he believes can incubate bullies in the workplace:

1. Many nonprofits have hierarchical organizational structures, little managerial accountability and scant board oversight of human resources issues.



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2. People may come to believe that the ends represented by the mission justify any means to accomplish them, including bullying employees and colleagues.
 3. Some nonprofits may see dedication to the cause as being a more important criterion in a leader than the ability to manage and work well with staff.
 4. In a time of shrinking budgets and declining revenue, the pressure to “do more with less” may be causing the kinds of stress that can lead people to bully colleagues.
 5. Finally, because bullying recognizes no political, economic, social or religious boundaries, there is no reason to expect that nonprofits would be somehow exempt.
- Just how prevalent is workplace bullying in the nonprofit sector? In its 2008 survey of more than 1,000 nonprofit staff from 181 charities in the U.K., Birdsong Charity Consulting (www.bird-song.co.uk) and *Third Sector* magazine (www.thirdsector.co.uk) found that 12 percent of respondents had experienced bullying within the last year, and workplace bullies were more likely to be found in smaller charities with a staff of 25 or fewer. The study, *The Impact of Bullying in the Voluntary Sector*, also found the following revealing results:
- More than half (57 percent) of survey respondents strongly agreed with the statement “In the last year, I have been bullied at work.”

Image Source/Corbis



- Senior managers are more likely than others to be bullied.
- The highest incidence of bullying occurs among employees who have been with an organization between one and three years.
- Victims of bullying are more likely to feel disengaged from the cause as well as dissatisfied with the organization and its leadership.
- Of employees who describe themselves as “dissatisfied,” fully one-third report having been bullied within the previous 12 months.
- Bullying increases workplace stress and staff turnover.

According to the Birdsong survey, more than half of those employees who had experienced bullying were planning to leave their current institution within the next 12 months, compared with just 21 percent of all survey respondents. And with high turnover comes the potential for lost time and resources for hiring and training replacements, loss of institutional knowledge, disruption of donor stewardship, awkward questions from constituents and potentially increased scrutiny from grant makers, not to mention damage to the organization’s reputation from disgruntled former employees.

In 2012, the Society for Human Resources Management (www.shrm.org) published *SHRM Survey Findings: Workplace Bullying*, the results of a comprehensive and detailed survey of HR professionals. According to the survey findings, about half (51 percent) of organizations reported that there had been incidents of bullying in their workplace. Among these organizations, 73 percent reported verbal abuse, 62 percent reported malicious gossiping and/or spreading lies/rumors about workers, 50 percent reported threats or intimidation and 43 percent reported ignoring or excluding

workers. What are the outcomes of workplace bullying? The three most common outcomes that organizations experienced were decreased morale (68 percent), increased stress and/or depression levels (48 percent) and decreased trust among co-workers (45 percent). Furthermore, according to the survey, nonprofit organizations are more likely (77 percent) than privately owned for-profit organizations (41 percent) to report experiencing complaints about increased stress and/or depression levels as a result of workplace bullying incidents.

Studies of workplace bullying in the private sector report that anywhere from 30 to 70 percent of bullied employees will ultimately leave their employer as a direct result of being bullied. At a time when many nonprofits are struggling just to keep their doors open, no organization can afford to risk that kind of upheaval. When seen from that perspective, preventing workplace bullying becomes, in effect, a fiduciary responsibility for nonprofits.

What Does a Bully Look Like?

Workplace bullying can happen up and down the seniority ladder, as well as among peers. According to a 2012 CareerBuilder/Harris Interactive survey of 3,800 U.S. employees (“CareerBuilder Study Finds More Workers Feeling Bullied in the Workplace”), 11 percent of the respondents said they had been bullied by a colleague, while 14 percent reported bullying by their immediate supervisors and 7 percent said that the bully was a senior leader in the organization. The WBI 2010 *U.S. Workplace Bullying Survey* found that fully 62 percent of perpetrators were male. However, although male bullies tend to bully other men only slightly more than women, female bullies are far more likely to bully other women than men. According to the survey, Hispanics and African-Americans are the most likely to experience workplace bullying.

Studies and anecdotal evidence also show that when the bully is a high-ranking individual, fewer people are in a position to confront the bullying behavior. “Studies show that the stereotype of the ‘bully boss’ is true,” says Lunsford, noting that, according to some studies, up to 72 percent of bullying victims have reported that their tormentor was someone in a superior position to them. In the CareerBuilder/Harris Interactive survey, for example, almost half (48 percent) of the respondents reported being bullied by superiors or by people who were older than they were (54 percent). These results present an interesting contrast to the Birdsong survey of U.K. nonprofit staff, in which senior management was the largest group of survey respondents who reported that they had experienced bullying. This discrepancy suggests that more research into the nature of bullying by superiors may be warranted.

Lunsford’s statistic may come as a surprise to fundraisers and other nonprofit professionals who like to believe that their organizations are more egalitarian than other types of workplaces. However, as Lunsford points out, the cultural norms that inhibit people from questioning superiors cut across all types of workplace settings. “It’s up to executives and boards to be vigilant in maintaining the right office environment,” he

Workplace Bullying

says. “No matter their position or their perceived importance, no employee can be seen as immune to social convention and business ethics.”

Lunsford points to “The Influence of Corporate Psychopaths on Corporate Social Responsibility and Organizational Commitment to Employees,” a November 2010 article in the *Journal of Business Ethics* that explored the significant impacts of bullying by those at the top of an organization. According to the authors, who conducted a study of 346 corporate employees in Australia, leaders who demonstrate little regard for morality tend to have a strong effect on employees and undermine the sentiment that the organization “does business in a socially desirable manner ... [and] in a way that shows commitment to employees.”

The article looks at the role and impact of people the authors call “corporate psychopaths,” who use bullying to undermine organizational effectiveness. While most people may casually associate the term “psychopath” with violent criminal behavior, the authors stress that corporate psychopaths are instead people who exhibit many of the behaviors characteristic of psychopathy—a lack of empathy or remorse, an inflated ego, superficial charm, the ability to manipulate others, a tendency to make impulsive decisions and a lack of a sense of responsibility—in the context of the organization in which they work. Some or all of these behaviors may or may not be prerequisites for bullying. No one yet knows. In fact, it is important to keep in mind that “psychopathy” is a social, not a clinical, diagnosis. However, it seems reasonable to assume that at least some of these personality traits could be associated with someone who bullies his or her colleagues.

Regardless of the cause of their behavior, Lunsford says, bullies in leadership positions ultimately have the same corrosive effect on their organizations. “Whether it’s an influential board member, the executive who brings in the most financial support or the manager who always seems to get the job done regardless of the cost,” he says, “no amount of short-term gain can make up for the inevitable loss of morale, disenchantment with the mission and negative association that will come with tolerating abuse from on high.”

Character Traits and Workplace Culture

According to the Workplace Bullying Institute, the personality traits of people who work at “prosocial” institutions in education and healthcare, where there is a deep-seated belief in the mission and a desire to help others, may make them particularly vulnerable to bullying. “Bullying happens when individuals, commonly competent, well-liked, ethical and apolitical, are confronted by others who are willing to exploit these traits to further their own interests,” Lunsford explains. “The effects are heightened in individuals who are nonconfrontational and

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who have an over-investment of identity in their job, traits sometimes found in people who work at nonprofits. Their sense of justice is shattered as they attempt to reconcile the organization’s altruistic mission with the dehumanizing abuse they receive at the hands of another.”

Lunsford says that most targets of bullying initially react with disbelief and are willing to rationalize the bully’s behavior as exceptional or unintentional and therefore something to be excused. He theorizes that, in some circumstances, nonprofit employees may be more hesitant to make their plight known if they believe it could jeopardize the harmony of the team or the effectiveness of the organization in carrying out its mission. “After all,” he says, “the abuser is also working toward the same altruistic goal.”

It takes more than individual personality traits to create a work environment that fosters bullying, however. It also requires an institutional culture of acquiescence. “Bullies are unknowingly encouraged to continue their harassment of others when management, superiors or the collective organizational culture fails to intercede,” Lunsford points out. If the workplace culture discourages people from raising a red flag for fear of “rocking the boat,” it may unwittingly be aiding and abetting an epidemic of workplace bullying.

On the other hand, a nonprofit’s focus on the public good also can be its greatest asset for curbing workplace bullying. “When an individual acts in a way that undercuts another worker, a client or the organization, positive social pressure and reliance on the strength of the mission are excellent ways of curbing such undesirable behavior,” Lunsford says. To be effective, interventions should happen as soon as the bullying is recognized or reported and also should be reinforced throughout the entire organization. Once that happens, the effect can be surprisingly swift. “It often takes only one rebuke from a concerned coworker to stop bullying in its tracks,” Lunsford adds.

How to Stop Workplace Bullying

Ending workplace bullying is an all-hands operation. It requires bullying victims to stand up for themselves, colleagues to intercede when they witness bullying and leaders to set the proper tone for the whole organization. Policies and procedures for reporting bullying should be established, and employees should be encouraged and instructed to use them. Ultimately, the organizational culture itself should be evaluated to ensure that bullying behaviors are not condoned, facilitated or, even worse, actually encouraged. These steps will help keep your employees happy—and help keep them your employees.

People who experience bullying can take steps to combat workplace bullying in ways that will not unravel the fabric of the organization. According to the CareerBuilder/Harris

Interactive survey, fully half of the employees who confronted their tormentors reported that the bullying stopped, while 38 percent said that confrontation did not change anything and 11 percent reported that the bullying actually increased.

Beyond the level of immediate response, however, non-profits also should put into place best practices to prevent bullying from ever becoming a liability, according to employment practices expert Cathy Padalino. In her article “Confronting Bullying in the Workplace” (*Philanthropy Journal*, 2008), she recommends the following preventive measures:

- Antiharassment training programs
- Management and supervisor training
- A zero-tolerance, antiharassment policy
- An open reporting policy and complaint resolution procedure
- Adherence to state legislation on workplace bullying

- Employment practices liability insurance

Another way to prevent bullying is to make sure your organization has in place healthy and robust channels of communication among colleagues, across departments and up and down the chain of command. If people are already comfortable with the idea that they can talk to whomever they need to about operational and programmatic issues, they will be more likely to also share their concerns about experiencing or witnessing bullying. Good communications also encourage people to take responsibility for themselves and for each other, which in turn can lead to a stronger sense of loyalty to the organization and a reduction in untimely turnover. 🗨️

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➔ Resources

To learn more about the warning signs of an unhealthy workplace—and how to prevent or eliminate the problem—here are some useful books, articles and resources on workplace bullying.

The Bully-Free Workplace: Stop Jerks, Weasels and Snakes From Killing Your Organization by Gary Namie, Ph.D., and Ruth Namie, Ph.D. (Wiley, 2011), hardcover, 190 pages

The No Asshole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn't by Robert I. Sutton, Ph.D. (Business Plus, 2007), paperback, 238 pages

The Workplace Bullying Institute offers links to reports, books, presentations, podcasts, webinars and many other resources for workers, families and employers.

www.workplacebullying.org

The 2010 *U.S. Workplace Bullying Survey*, conducted by Zogby International for the Workplace Bullying Institute

www.workplacebullying.org/multi/pdf/WBI_2010_Natl_Survey.pdf

SHRM Survey Findings: Workplace Bullying, published in 2012 by the Society for Human Resources Management

www.shrm.org/research/survey/findings/articles/pages/workplacebullying.aspx

The Impact of Bullying in the Voluntary Sector: Insights from the Charity Pulse 2008 Staff Satisfaction Survey, a study of workplace bullying in the U.K., published by Birdsong Charity Consulting

www.bird-song.co.uk

Exploring Solutions to Workplace Bullying, a report published in 2012 by Dr. Jerry Carbo of the Grove College of Business at Shippensburg University

www.aabri.com/OC2012Manuscripts/OC12037.pdf

Minding the Workplace (<http://newworkplace.wordpress.com>), the blog of the New Workplace Institute at Suffolk University Law School in Boston. The host, David C. Yamada, professor of law and director of the New Workplace Institute, has written model antibullying legislation, which has been dubbed the Healthy Workplace Bill.

“The Influence of Corporate Psychopaths on Corporate Social Responsibility and Organizational Commitment to Employees” by Clive R. Boddy, Richard K. Ladyshewsky and Peter Galvin, *Journal of Business Ethics*, November 2010, volume 97, issue 1, pp. 1–19

<http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs10551-010-0492-3?LI=true>

“CareerBuilder Study Finds More Workers Feeling Bullied in the Workplace”

www.careerbuilder.com/share/about-us/pressreleasesdetail.aspx?sd=8%2F29%2F2012&id=pr713&ed=12%2F31%2F2012

“Workplace Bullying in the Nonprofit Sector” by David C. Yamada

www.newworkplace.wordpress.com/2011/01/17/workplace-bullying-in-the-non-profit-sector/

“Confronting Bullying in the Workplace” by Cathy Padalino (*Philanthropy Journal*, Aug. 29, 2008)

www.philanthropyjournal.org/resources/managementleadership/confronting-bullying-workplace

“When the Bully Sits in the Next Cubicle” by Tara Parker-Pope, *The New York Times*, March 25, 2008

www.nytimes.com/2008/03/25/health/25well.html?_r=0

“Workplace Bullying: The Problem—and Its Costs—Are Worse Than We Thought” <http://business.time.com/2012/07/12/workplace-bullying-the-problem-and-its-costs-are-worse-than-we-thought/>

“Escaping Bullying: The Simultaneous Impact of Individual and Unit-Level Bullying on Turnover Intentions” by Marjan Houshmand, Jane O’Reilly, Sandra Robinson and Angela Wolff, *Human Relations*, July 2012, 65: 901–918