

Inappropriate Workplace Behavior: Bullying or Harassment?

You've probably encountered references to workplace "bullying" in recent years and you may have wondered what this refers to and whether it is just another way to describe "harassment" or a "hostile work environment."

Bullying in the workplace does not constitute "illegal" behavior in the U.S. Harassment and a hostile work environment that are based upon an employee's protected status (e.g., race, color, creed or religion, national origin, sex, marital status, disability, sexual orientation, and military status) are "illegal" forms of discrimination.

These "illegal" forms of discrimination occur when the terms and conditions of a person's employment are adversely affected by offensive and unwelcome conduct that is based upon the employee's membership in one of the protected categories.

The topic of workplace bullying has gained momentum and understanding based upon data collected in several research fields, including law, communications, business management and psychology. The research suggests that 37 percent of the U.S. workforce has experienced some form of workplace bullying. Researchers define bullying as one form of so-called workplace aggression, which they divided into categories:

- **Incivility:** rudeness and discourteous verbal and non-verbal behaviors.
- **Bullying:** persistently criticizing employees' work; yelling; repeatedly reminding employees of mistakes; spreading gossip or lies; ignoring or excluding workers; and insulting employees' habits, attitudes or private life.
- **Interpersonal conflict:** behaviors of hostility, verbal aggression and angry exchanges.



The Washington State Department of Labor and Industries (L&I) defines workplace bullying as "repeated, unreasonable actions of individuals (or a group) directed towards an employee (or group of employees), which is intended to intimidate and creates a risk to the health and safety of the employee(s)."

Because bullying is not illegal, this type of workplace aggression is addressed in a limited fashion through employer policies and collective bargaining agreements.

Workplace bullying has a significant negative impact on employees and the organization. In fact, compared with sexually harassed workers, employees who are receiving bullying behavior and other forms of workplace aggression reported lower overall well-being, less job satisfaction and less satisfaction with their bosses; and they were also more likely to quit their jobs.

Victims of bullying suffer physical and mental problems such as high stress, financial problems due to absence, reduced self-esteem, musculoskeletal problems, phobias, sleep disturbances, increased depression, and digestive problems.

Organizations suffer costs related to replacing staff that leave due to bullying, reduced productivity due to time spent coping with the affects of bullying, costs associated with investigations of ill treatment and potential legal action.

Tips for employees dealing with workplace bullying

Employees who feel they are victims of bullying should recognize the problem for what it is and take action.

When expressing their concerns, employees should do so in a rational and linear fashion, keep emotions in check, provide consistent details (documented if possible), offer a plausible story, provide only relevant details regarding the bully's behavior, emphasize your own confidence, and be specific. — *By Local 17 Union Representative Janet Parks*

