

Fighting bullying in workplace

By Kelly L. Anderson
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Are you working in a place where there's discontent, a high rate of turnover, a lack of communication, an overbearing boss trying to exert his/her power, sexual harassment or a group of employees who regularly get together to mock a co-worker?

If so, you may be working in an environment that fosters workplace bullying, say three Rhode Island experts who hope to educate business owners on recognizing bullying and knowing the consequences and infractions of what they call a growing epidemic, even though incidences often go unreported.

That's why William E. O'Gara, a partner and chair of Providence's Pannone Lopes Devereaux & West's employment-litigation teams, Cindy Butler, a senior professional in human resources at Butler Associates, and Anthony Wheeler, senior professional in human resources and an associate professor of human-resource management at the University of Rhode Island, decided to host a free seminar on "Workplace Bullying & Employers: Challenges, Consequences and Costs."

The idea for the Dec. 7 event at the Crowne Plaza Warwick-Providence, evolved after O'Gara read an article that Wheeler put together fleshing out the issue of workplace bullying, an issue generating increasing interest among employers, O'Gara said.

The purpose of the presentation is to provide human-resources practitioners, business owners, nonprofit executives and employment attorneys with information about workplace bullying, its causes and effects, and recommendations for addressing and mitigating the effects of workplace bullying.



PBN PHOTO/BRIAN MCDONALD BULLY PULPIT: Butler Associates Senior Professional Cynthia J. Butler, Pannone Lopes Devereaux & West partner William E. O'Gara, center, and Schmidt Labor Research Center associate professor Anthony R. Wheeler discuss workplace bullying.

It includes the differences between bullying and harassment, subtle underlying bias, the legal, financial and environmental challenges, case studies and recommended best practices and includes prevention strategies, training and policies.

“Over the last few years I have received more and more calls from clients who are dealing with issues related to bullying in the workplace and trying to navigate an appropriate response,” O’Gara said.

More than 50 people have indicated plans to attend the Dec. 7 presentation, Butler said. The program has been approved for 1.5 general recertification credit hours toward PHR, SPHR and GPHR recertification through the HR Certification Institute.

“We’re talking about a persistent – normally we mean multiweek – hostility [that] can be physical or verbally abusive and typically it’s directed from a supervisor down to a subordinate,” Wheeler said.

But lately they’ve seen an increase in people bullying co-workers or peers, he said.

“There’s actually a group-bullying term called ‘mobbing,’ which is sort of an interesting phenomenon where one lead bully coordinates the efforts of some underlings and they kind of move from target to target and normally what ends up happening to those targets of that bullying or mobbing is that you’re going to end up with this sort of turnover, lack of productivity and decreased satisfaction,” Wheeler said.

You also get the targeted employee acting out in retaliation towards the bullying, creating sort of a hostile working environment that tends to not be a good place to do business for people.

“There’s some imbalance of power, so it may be the power of a manager or supervisor, it may be the power over someone – intellectual superiority – and holding it over someone else, it may be social,” Butler said. “It could be directed towards someone or you could be excluding someone so you may have this social group or mob and they may be ignoring people in the work force and making them feel inferior.”

Some statistics gathered by the team on workplace bullying include:

- Globally, workplace bullying commonly occurs in organizations, with anywhere between eight to 25 percent of employees currently working in jobs across industries reporting experiencing the unwanted attention of bullies.

- According to the Workplace Bullying Institute, an estimated 35 percent to 50 percent of American workers report having experienced or witnessed workplace bullying over their work careers.
- Workplace bullying also leads to severe organizational consequences. For example, as most bullying-related litigation flows through equal-employment-protection laws in the United States, in 2009 it is estimated that litigating bullying-related claims costs can exceed \$350,000 per case.
- Workplace bullying also impacts other areas, including turnover and retention, performance management, mentoring, employee benefits, positive employee well-being, group and team dynamics, employee involvement and rights and risk management and prevention.

The three Rhode Island specialists also studied recommendations to combat workplace bullying, including being reactive to bullying events. Anti-bullying human-resources advocates recommend stringent “no bullying” policies and training that addresses bullying after it has occurred.

Employers should address the environmental factors that create the stress which has been found to directly lead to bullying. Those factors include poor job design, rewarding and supporting bullies, employee perceptions of lack of control or autonomy over their work, restructuring and downsizing and organizational change.

“The key is that it’s something that’s persistent, so it’s not a one-off situation,” Butler said. “There’s a pattern of this behavior and one of the things that makes bullying so difficult to grapple with in an organization is that it’s a perception. So what one person might perceive as bullying, another person won’t.”