

risk management

Workplace Bullying: There is Power in One Voice

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When most of us hear the word “bully” we often picture the school yard bully that called us names, shoved us down or the bully on the bus who would not let us take a seat and then took our lunch money. In recent years, schools have new requirements. The 2009 Wisconsin Act 309 required the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction to develop and post a model school bullying policy for pupils. Wisconsin school districts were then required to adopt and distribute a policy on an annual basis. The act also designates a day in September as Bullying Awareness Day. Our schools are making great strides confronting bullying in the classroom; however, does bullying stop when students graduate from high school?

Bullying is not confined to childhood and it is critical to recognize it in more arenas than just the schoolroom. To that end, workplace bullying has been a topic of national articles and several Wisconsin seminars over the past decade. Additionally, it has inspired proposed legislation as part of the Wisconsin for the Healthy Workplace Bill. Wisconsin Representative Sony Pope-Roberts plans to reintroduce a revised version of the bill sometime during this legislative session. Workplace bullying is not protected by any current laws unless it involves harassment based on a protected class. But bullying does not stop once you leave the workplace; it also affects older adults in our aging programs and health care centers.

The Workplace Bullying Institute defines workplace bullying as repeated mistreatment and abusive conduct that is threatening,

humiliating, intimidating, work sabotage or verbal abuse. *Psychology Today* magazine calls it the “silent epidemic.” The workplace bully may be the supervisor, co-worker or customer. A bully supervisor may frequently belittle employees in front of peers, place unreasonable expectations upon them, or threaten their job security. Bullying can take the form of a boss or co-worker taking credit for another’s work or erupting in screaming and yelling. “Mobbing” is a horrifying new trend where a bully enlists co-workers to collude with them. Mobbing can have an even greater impact on a victim’s psychological well-being.

If the purpose of bullying is to increase the social status of the bully or give them a feeling of power, then it is not unusual for the bully to target someone the bully feels threatened by, such as the most highly respected, greatest experienced or popular staff member.

Bullying can affect both a victim’s mental and physical health. The longer the bullying occurs, the more severe the impact is to the victim. Just a few examples of the stress that is caused by bullying are anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances and digestive problems. These issues can lead to decreased productivity, greater usage of sick leave and eventually turnover.

All employees should be trained to recognize bullying. Victims should be trained how to regain control of a bullying situation, as well as taught that they are NOT the source of the problem. Recognizing that bullying is occurring is the first step in confronting the problem; however, immediately

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developing a plan of action for dealing with the bully is equally important and can include a wide variety of solutions.

Determining a response to the bully ahead of time gives an employer, as well as the victim an advantage. Preparation gives the victim confidence for whatever may occur. Using phrases such as “Really?,” “Why would you say that?,” or “You need to be more respectful,” should be stored and ready to go. Placing the focus on the word “you” directs the attention to the bully’s behavior. Never make it about the victim’s feelings, such as “I feel...” statements. Interrupting the pattern of the bullying can be very beneficial. If an individual is berating or yelling, the best choice for the victim may be having a plan to walk away from the abuse instead of attempting to defend themselves. There are times that when the victim pushes back against the bully, the bullying increases in severity.

What can your county do to ensure a healthy workplace? Employers can take action in a number of ways. October is National Bullying Prevention Awareness month. Last fall, Juneau and Columbia Counties adopted resolutions declaring Freedom from Workplace Bullies Week. Columbia County is providing ongoing management and leadership training to focus on management skills and teach staff how they can avoid or address bullying behavior. Creating a zero-tolerance, anti-bullying policy is another direction. Several years ago, Kenosha County implemented a Respectful Workplace Policy and Marathon County a Workplace Bullying Policy. Marathon County’s policy also addresses the bystander’s responsibility of reporting bullying. Marathon County includes workplace bullying as part of their training program. This training is an essential component since many current employees have never received bullying awareness training.

There is power in one voice and one policy.

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