



Bully Culture Is a Safety Hazard in the Public Sector

BY DAVID DANIELS, MHRH, CSD, SHS

Bullying in the workplace is a problem that affects millions of workers annually, including many in the public sector. An appointed official or employee of a local, state, or federal government employee being berated, verbally assaulted, or sexually harassed has become so common place in some organizations that it is given little or no thought. While often discussed and described from a human resource perspective, bullying and the culture that undergirds it is also an issue that safety professionals should be concerned about.

In its 2017 national survey, the Workplace Bullying Institute defined bullying “as repeated mistreatment of an employee by one or more employees; abusive conduct that is: threatening, humiliating, or intimidating, work sabotage, or verbal abuse”. The survey makes a number of startling assertions including the fact that:

60.4 million Americans are affected by bullying

61% of bullies are bosses, the majority (63%) operate alone

71% of employer reactions are harmful to targets

The safety professional has an important role in preventing and addressing hazing, bullying, harassment and violence in the workplace. While some instances of bullying are difficult to describe objectively, the emotional and in some cases physical results of the behavior can have profound effects on not only employee health, but the



overall effectiveness of the organization itself. In the public sector, low effectiveness can translate into high costs and lower services levels.

A few thoughts safety professional to keep in mind when addressing a bullying culture include:

Expanding your view of safety. There are actually six types of hazards that workers are exposed to in the workplace including Physical (Noise, heat and cold, etc.), Chemical, Ergonomic, Radiation, Biological and Psychological. Psychological safety can at times be at the root of other potential safety hazards in that people often act based on ways that they feel. People who feel bullied or harassed can escalate to actions that result in increased vulnerability from other safety hazards.

Remain Neutral. The safety officer's job is NOT to protect the organization OR to protect the individuals at the exclusion of the other, but to ensure that the environment in the workplace is safe for BOTH. Ere on the side of what creates a workplace that is "As Safe as Reasonably Achievable". It means that you have to be on the side of safety and remain as neutral as possible, so both the organization and the individuals will trust you enough to report instances of hazing, bullying and harassment.

Expand your training and expertise. The safety professional who is focused on singular hazards limits their ultimate value to the organization. The major role of the safety professional is to help create a culture of hazard prevention where employees don't get hurt in the first place. This applies to psychological safety hazards such as bullying hazing and harassment as well as physical hazards. Safety professional needs to expand their understanding, training, expertise and willingness to address psychological safety issues for the good of the organizations that they are involved in.



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