

H.R. Risk

Workplace Bullying Can Cost Your Company

WORKPLACE BULLYING is on the increase, and it constitutes a major risk to companies that fail to take action.

If you learn of a bully in your ranks, you need to take immediate steps to mount a serious investigation and take action if the accusations turn out to be valid. The financial future of your company is riding on it, as a bullied employee could sue your firm for failing to take appropriate action.

But cases are not always cut and dry, and you need to have rules to go by if you receive a complaint. Your bullying prevention policy needs to:

Define bullying

In 1976, San Francisco doctor Carroll Brodsky defined workplace bullying or harassment as:

“Repeated and persistent attempts by one person to torment, wear down, frustrate, or get a reaction from another. It is treatment which persistently provokes, pressures, frightens, intimidates or otherwise discomforts another person.”

The website *workplacebullying.org* describes it as:

“Repeated, health-harming mistreatment, verbal abuse, or conduct which is threatening, humiliating, intimidating or sabotage that interferes with work or some combination of the three.”

Identify bullies

If you receive a complaint about bullying in the workplace, you’ll need to collect evidence, and interview other workers who may have witnessed the bullying.

You’ll need to document the behavior and evaluate if it rises to the level of your definition of bullying.

Identifying a bully that yells and swears is easy, and others engage in childish pranks such as hiding personal possessions, gluing lockers shut or defacing property. But others do it quietly.

Subtle Forms of Bullying

- Giving false or misleading information about fellow workers or subordinates,
- Scapegoating,
- Abusing authority by threatening to or giving poor or undeserved evaluations,
- Stealing credit,
- Giving arbitrary instructions, and
- Threatening untoward consequences for failing to comply with directives.

Spell out complaint and response procedures

Spell out how workers can file a complaint and your procedures for responding to them, including how you would investigate.

Include disciplinary procedures if you have an employee who is found to be harassing others. Depending on the severity, punishment can be light like a warning; or severe, including termination.

Whatever you do, don’t ignore complaints of bullying.

The takeaway

The costs for tolerating bullying are many: low morale, absenteeism, high turnover, difficulty recruiting and retaining talented staff, or litigation against the business..

Often the target of the bully is afraid to report such actions for fear that the bullying will get worse. Make sure your policies ensure protection against retaliation from the bully.

Finally, if you have employment practices liability insurance, it may cover the legal fees and court judgments, but you may still have to suffer through depositions, discovery and even a court trial. Prevention and swift action if you discover bullying in your ranks are the best, and cheapest option. ❖



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