



Bullies in the Healthcare Workplace

For the third time in as many years, you are listening to a new employee complain about your superstar employee (the one you think you cannot do without). The complaints are familiar: “Superstar” makes demeaning remarks to other employees, pits one employee against another, withholds crucial information from co-workers, and intrudes on employees’ privacy. Yes, you realize, that’s just what Superstar’s former co-workers said just before *they* each quit. You have talked to Superstar in the past about her behavior, and what you got in return were denials, excuses, and short-lived improvement. What is the solution to this continuing problem? Fire the Superstar. You and your workplace will be better off in the long run.

‘Superstar’ is a bully.

Superstar’s behavior uses some of the tried-and-true tools of manipulation and intimidation. A bully in the workplace is someone who repeatedly engages in any of the following behaviors against co-workers or supervisors:

- Verbal abuse or yelling.
- Consistent angry demeanor when interacting with targeted persons.
- Non-verbal actions that are demeaning, threatening, humiliating, or that create unnecessary problems for others, *i.e.*, “mistakenly” throwing away another employee’s lunch; “forgetting” to deliver a message from a spouse.
- Interference with or sabotage of other’s work.
- Isolating the targeted persons from opportunities and outings.
- Throwing or slamming things.
- Withholding information that other employees need.

- Intrusion on the privacy of others by sneaking around to overhear conversations, to look at screens on phones or computers, to look over employees' desks and personal items, etc.
- Gossiping and asking inappropriate questions, *i.e.*, "So how much does she make here anyway?"
- Negative comments about the targeted person's commitment, abilities, personal life, appearance, financial situation, etc.
- Acting in a way to increase the likelihood that employees will fail in their assignments through a pattern of, for example, changing project requirements in mid-stream, refusing to provide needed feedback, constant criticism that is not constructive and aims to undermine an employee's belief that success in the task can be achieved, giving impossible deadlines, putting unreasonable pressure on employees, or assigning too much work.
- Blaming others for mistakes.
- Taking credit for others' work.

Bullying costs your business money every day.

Bullies spend a lot of the workday engaging in the activities of bullying rather than doing the work you hired them to do. They distract other employees from their own work by having to deal with bullying. The bullied employee expends his time and energy deciding how to respond to the bully, whether to approach management, whether to quit, and often spends your time in your office complaining to you. And then there's the fact that employees who are bullied tend to miss work more often. Other employees who are not the direct targets of the bullying frequently get drawn into the drama by being urged to support the bully or the target. The overall office morale is low, and turnover becomes high. The bottom line is that the bully creates a massive loss of productivity in your office. The bully is taking money out of your pocket.

Bullying behavior increases risk for healthcare providers.

Bullies in a healthcare provider's office are particularly troublesome. Physicians are familiar with the old concept of the "disruptive physician" and the Joint

Commission's current standards on preventing and correcting "behaviors that undermine a culture of safety." If there's a bully in an office, work is not getting done efficiently and communication among co-workers and supervisors is suffering. These breakdowns make healthcare providers' offices far more likely to experience "near misses," adverse events, and patient dissatisfaction.

Can't I rehabilitate a bullying employee like Superstar?

Good luck with that. People who have been bullying others for the majority of their working life do it in part because they get some kind of emotional or other return on their considerable investment of time and energy in the bullying behaviors. Unless such a person is highly motivated to change, my opinion is that your efforts at rehabilitation will be a waste of your time.

By contrast, an inexperienced supervisor, employee, or healthcare provider for that matter, can begin their business life with the mistaken impression that the best way to motivate others is through fear and intimidation. Seminars or other training on how to appropriately manage or work with others may be effective in nipping this bad behavior in the bud.

How much effort you expend on trying to salvage a bullying employee is up to you. Be aware that the bully likely will drag you down the rabbit hole by shifting any discussion of his or her own unacceptable behaviors into a tale of woe about how the bully is truly the victim. The bully may try to convince you that he or she is the only one who cares about your business and he or she is only trying to look out for you. Bullies are excellent manipulators of people and are very adept at providing reassurances to those to have the power to fire them. You have to keep any conversation focused on the bully's unacceptable behavior and the consequences that will be imposed.

What if the accused employee denies all accusations of bullying?

That would not be at all surprising. Bullies are adept at the timing and location of their attacks; frequently the only witnesses are the bully and the target. That means it is often one person's word against another.

You are right to suspect that something is amiss if you have repeated and similar complaints about one employee from different employees over different time periods, such as in the case of Superstar.

Whether you have a report of one alleged bullying incident or several, you may want to seek the assistance of your legal counsel in investigating the facts and deciding what action to take.

Don't let your reputation be harmed

If you tolerate bullies in your office, your employees will lose respect for you, and your office will become known as an undesirable place to work and perhaps as an undesirable place to receive medical care. You will be seen by staff as lacking in leadership because you are unwilling to confront the bully and put a stop to the abusive behaviors. When staff loses respect and generally has bad morale, those feelings can get communicated to patients, vendors and other physicians in all sorts of ways, from the lackluster way the phone is answered to the sullen responses to vendor requests for information. Having a bully is toxic – your whole office will eventually be poisoned.

Set the proper example

If you see employees engaging in bullying behaviors, you should let them know promptly and unequivocally that such behavior is unacceptable. One way to jump start educating your employees is to enact a “Respectful Workplace” policy and then meet with employees about it. Your legal counsel can help you draft a policy that fits your practice. The policy sets out unacceptable behaviors, the procedure for reporting a violation of the policy, and the disciplinary consequences of violations.

Will I face legal liability for firing a bully?

Probably not, if you treat all your at-will employees the same and you adequately document your personnel actions. Legal counsel familiar with employment law can help you navigate the documentation and termination procedures.

You can regain control of your office.

When you have a bully running unchecked in your office, the bully is really running the office, not you. You can get control back of your employees, their

productivity, and of the unnecessary risks to your business and your reputation if you act decisively to eliminate bullying.