

Loraleigh Keashly, an associate professor of urban and labor studies at Wayne State University in Detroit, called bullying "very much a part of the workplace experience" despite the misperception--especially popular in the United States--that it is a problem largely for schools.

Psychological aggression in the workplace, she said, can have "devastating" effects leading to physical, mental and emotional illnesses, as well as reduced productivity and increased absenteeism by employees.

"Media reports give the impression that physical violence is the norm, but it's not," Keashly said. Bullying involves more subtle types of aggression, including ignoring a person's contributions, flaunting status, pulling rank, making unwanted eye contact and openly belittling individuals, she explained.

"You should never berate someone publicly," said Keashly.

Other types of bullying include vandalism, gestures, withholding of important information and making faces--"even smiling the wrong way," said Denenberg. "It can be very subtle."

Much bullying seems designed, either expressly or subconsciously, to undermine the target employee's self-confidence and to cause the worker to perform poorly, he said.

One reason employers have tended to dismiss psychologically aggressive behavior, experts say, is that it is much more difficult to define and diagnose than physical violence, which causes damage that is often clearly visible.

And some of the symptoms of bullying--substance abuse, declines in productivity and increased absenteeism--may be caused by other factors or a combination of factors.

Another reason for bullying being overlooked is that employees may be hesitant to report it.

Often, Denenberg said, these workers don't like to admit that they have been victimized, and they are fearful of retribution from both bullies and employers. He said employees who have borne the brunt of bullying may worry that their managers will consider them either chronic complainers or "shirkers" looking for an excuse to avoid work.

Most people on the receiving end of aggressive behavior, when asked what they did about it, say they did nothing, according to Keashly. That's because they assume--sometimes correctly--that their organizations will be unresponsive, she said.

However, employers should remember that organizations can be "very influential" in affecting the amount of aggressive behavior, Keashly said.

A third explanation for the underemphasis on bullying, Field said, is that employers who admit that the problem exists among their workers also might have to bear responsibility for some of the conditions causing it to flourish.

Field said most people who call his advice line work at organizations where bullying is "rife" and is used to hide managerial inadequacies. If employers were to take the problem of bullying seriously, he said, they might have to stare their own shortcomings in the face.

Keashly said employers often focus on the individual as the source of a problem when, in the case of bullying, they should cast a wider net. "We tend to have a bias toward fixing the individual, when the organization also has a responsibility," she said.

Denenberg said that while bullying of subordinates by bosses occurs, peer-on-peer bullying is more of a problem for employers because there are fewer means of redress. If an employee is bullied by his or her manager, for example, the worker could sue under anti-harassment laws or file a grievance through a labor union, he said.

In contrast, Denenberg said, employees often have nowhere to turn when they are being harassed by a co-worker. "What happens when the source of the harassment is another employee?" he asked rhetorically.

Organizations that may be prone to bullying include those that are adversarial or unusually competitive, Keashly said. Also, European studies have pointed to organizations that are autocratic or rigidly hierarchical, she added.

The most dangerous type of bully, Field explained, is the "serial bully," who is not merely reacting to stressful or unhealthy workplace conditions but engages in psychological aggression regardless of the circumstances.

The serial bully, he said, is very aggressive and dysfunctional and often is an introvert, which would make him that much more difficult to detect and deal with. Field said introverted bullies tend to be very intelligent and "very subtle," leaving little, if any, evidence of their handiwork.

Some countries have addressed the workplace bully, including Sweden, which enacted a "dignity at work" law. Field said the British Parliament, under pressure from organized labor, considered a similar bill several years ago. He said the Manufacturing, Science and Finance Union, the bill's staunchest supporter, has indicated it may renew its push for the legislation.

Keashly said the United States lags behind many western European nations in addressing workplace bullying. U.S. government officials and employers place relatively more emphasis on physical attacks and on racial and sexual harassment, she said, compared with "generalized workplace harassment."

Denenberg recommended that employers concerned about bullying watch for it on a continuing basis and, if they spot a problem, establish a mediation process. He said one model might be the community mediation programs that San Francisco and other municipalities have used for years in addressing problems related to gang violence, ethnic conflicts and sexual orientation differences.

He also said some school systems have had great success with peer mediation programs in which students are taught to be alert to bullying and other problem behaviors.

A positive policy on bullying would go beyond prohibiting certain behaviors, Keashly said, to describe what a healthy work relationship is. A good start is to "focus people on what respectful relationships are like," she said.

Robert W. Thompson is managing editor of HR News.

Workplace Substance Abuse - Did You Know?

Incidence of Substance Abuse in the Workplace

- ◆ Eight percent of full-time workers employed as adults are current users of illicit drugs. (1)
- ◆ The rate of illicit drug use among full-time workers is higher for:
 - Construction workers - 16%
 - Food preparation, waitstaff, and bartenders - 11%
 - Handlers, helpers, or laborers - 11%
 - Machine operators or inspectors - 11% (1)
- ◆ About 8% of the workforce are heavy drinkers, with significantly higher rates among:
 - Construction workers - 17.6%
 - Food preparation, waitstaff, and bartenders - 12%
 - Handlers, helpers, or laborers - 16%
 - Machine operators or inspectors - 14% (1)
- ◆ Seventeen percent of employees surveyed across five different work sites reported situations that imply prescription drug misuse. (2)
- ◆ Small businesses are more likely to have problems with illicit drugs. (3)
 - Employees in companies with fewer than 25 employees are twice as likely to use illicit drugs as employees in larger companies.
 - Illicit drug use among employees is linked to a lack of workplace drug policies; illicit drug users were less likely than employees from large establishments to report that their employer provided information, had written policies, or provided access to an employee assistance program (EAP).
- ◆ Fifteen percent of illicit drug users and 6% of heavy alcohol users report that they had gone to work high or a little drunk in the past year. (4)
- ◆ Seventy-five percent of people calling a cocaine hotline said they sometimes used cocaine on the job; 25% said they took cocaine on the job daily. (5)
- ◆ Drug-using employees at GM average 40 days of sick leave each year, compared with 4.5 days for nonusers.
- ◆ Employees testing positive on pre-employment drug tests at Utah Power & Light were five times more likely to be involved in a workplace accident than those who tested negative.
- ◆ The State of Wisconsin estimates that expenses and losses related to substance abuse average 25% of the salary of each worker affected.



Cost to Employers of Employees with a Diagnosed Chemical Dependency Problem

- ◆ Alcoholism causes 500 million lost workdays each year (6)
- ◆ Alcoholics are expensive to businesses in several different ways:
 - Workplace accident rates are two or three times higher than normal;
 - Alcoholics are five times more likely to file a worker's compensation claim; and
 - Alcoholics are 2.5 times more likely to have absences of eight days or more. (5)
- ◆ Employees diagnosed with a chemical dependency problem in a large manufacturing plant were found to have:
 - Six times the number of absences;
 - Seven times the number of days missed from work; and
 - Higher incidence of injuries, hypertension, and mental disorders. (7)

Continued from page 12

managed care. Because of the announcement, the *Washington Post* reported in mid-November, "investors unloaded shares of national HMOs...erasing \$12 billion in stock value in a single day." The *Post* noted "the companies have since regained some, though hardly all, of those losses."

The *Post* added that one lawyer working on the HMO litigation—Mississippi's Richard Scruggs, best known for his assault on the tobacco industry—has been meeting with key HMO analysts on Wall Street. The pummeling of its stock was seen as a big factor motivating American Home Products Corp. into a \$3.75 billion out-of-court settlement with users of the fen-phen diet pill combo, the *Post* observed.

Aetna has dismissed the RICO allegations as "outrageous," while other managed care organizations would not comment. A Supreme Court ruling earlier this year in *Humana vs. Forsyth* allowed private actions against

health insurers under RICO, with its provision for triple damages. HMOs got better news in September, when a federal district court judge in Philadelphia dismissed a RICO class action, *Maio vs. Aetna*, that alleged all six million enrollees in Aetna HMOs were victims of a "fraudulent scheme." The victory did not come without a little pain, however, as U.S. District Judge John P. Fullam reasoned that the HMO's advertised claim to provide "quality care" constituted "puffery," not a promise that could serve as the foundation of a claim of fraud.

Nevertheless, "the dismissal in *Maio vs. Aetna* is a much-needed dose of reality for those who believed, erroneously, that the Supreme Court's *Humana* decision opened the floodgates for RICO suits against managed care companies," according to Stephanie Kanwit, an attorney with the Washington Legal Foundation. She lauds Fullam for noting that any dissatisfaction with HMOs "is more appropriately directed to the legislatures and regulatory bodies of the several states" than to the court system.

Domestic abuse follows women to work

Domestic violence begins at home, but its impact is far-reaching. One-half of employed, abused women missed three days of work per month, 64 percent were late, and 75 percent used company time to deal with court appearances and other violence issues, according to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence. The National Safe Workplace Institute found 96 percent of abuse victims experienced work problems. A recent study by Wayne Burton, MD, and Daniel Conti, PhD, of Bank One in Chicago (See November's *B&H*.) found that exposure to violence can increase unproductive time on the job by 40 percent, on average.

What's more, domestic abuse can literally spill over into the workplace. Most corporate safety and security directors surveyed by NSWI ranked domestic violence as a high security problem.

Beth Lindamood, a workplace violence expert with Ohio Casualty Group, in Hamilton, says, "Women who are victims of violent workplace crimes are twice as likely as men to know their attackers" and "can experience everything from harassment, threatening phone calls and e-mails, to stalking and violent confrontations." Coworkers can be affected as well, especially if they have to stop an altercation or witness an act of violence.

Lindamood recommends a zero-tolerance policy against workplace violence. Workers should be advised to report threats to a supervisor or confidential toll-free hotline. Employers should work with law enforcement officials, particularly if there is a restraining order, which should be on file. They should also allow time off for court appearances.

If a threat is reported, employers should develop a contingency plan, including:

- Moving the threatened employee's desk to a new location,
- Providing photos of the stalker to receptionists and security,
- Changing the employee's work schedule,
- Having the security guard walk the victim to her car,
- Advising the victim to save voice mail messages from the abuser,
- Referring the victim to community resources.

The public-private spending disconnect

In November the feds announced that Medicare spending fell 1 percent for fiscal year 1999, the first decline in the program's 33-year history and a turnaround from recent annual increases of as much as 10 percent.

That's a stark contrast to the private sector. Hewitt Associates reports a 7.8 percent increase in health benefits costs at large firms this year. Most recently the annual Deloitte & Touche/*Business & Health* Employer Survey on Managed Care found an average HMO rate increase of 8.7 percent. (See the article on page 28.)

The Congressional Budget Office in July linked slowing Medicare spending to reduced payments to home health agencies and to federal fraud-busting efforts.

Q: What tactics are cutting disability costs?

A: See *Data Watch* on page 48.



NEWS

Saturday, December 20, 1997

Workplace tension, monotony may have set off gunman, postal workers say

Last modified at 9:56 a.m. on Saturday, December 20, 1997



The AP

MILWAUKEE (AP) -- The overnight shift began much the same as ever: Paul Ciletti, a maintenance mechanic, and postal clerk Anthony Deculit exchanged greetings and settled in for the hectic, repetitious work of handling the holiday mail.

Michael Witkowski, 47, who witnessed the shooting at Milwaukee's main post office, is interviewed by channel 6 in Milwaukee, Wis., Friday. Witkowski says he pleaded with co-worker Anthony Deculit, 37, to stop by saying "Tony, you got a wife, a brand new baby, Christmas is right around the corner and in five days we'll be off." Deculit killed a colleague he had feuded with, wounded the supervisor who had reprimanded him and injured another postal worker before taking his own life.

Two-and-a-half hours later, with a busy crunch time of mail sorting approaching at the city's main post office, Deculit took out a .9mm-semiautomatic pistol and began firing, killing a fellow sorter and wounding his supervisor and another co-worker early Friday.

He then killed himself, leaving fellow post office workers to theorize whether management friction, racial tension and the drudgery of sorting the daily mail weighed on Deculit until he snapped.

With the sheer boredom of slogging through the mail day after day, along with the added strain of the last-minute Christmas rush, "it's just a matter of time before somebody goes off the deep end," Ciletti said.

"Sure, it's repetition, a lot of repetition. It gets tedious. You start doing eight hours, 12 hours a day," Ciletti said. "It's not a physically demanding job from the point of muscle, but it becomes physical on your mind."

Deculit had personal problems with his boss, feeling he was picked on and unfairly passed over for a transfer to a day shift at another facility, postal union officials said Friday.

At a news conference held by the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, some postal workers said racial discrimination in the post office may have been a factor. Deculit was black and his three victims were white.

"I can't condone the shooting, but on the same token he wouldn't have done it if there wasn't a problem," said Alvin Mann, who had a work locker next to Deculit's.

Felmers Chaney, the group's local president, said he warned postal officials about the problem of racial tensions.

"I told them, 'You're going to have a shooting here,'" Chaney said. "Now I feel like telling them, 'I told you so.'"

Chaney said he did not know if Deculit had made any complaints of racism against the Postal Service.

Deculit did file an employment grievance against his supervisor, Joan Chitwood, 55, after she had written him up a month before the shootings for sleeping on the job.

Chitwood was in satisfactory condition at Froedtert Lutheran Memorial Hospital after undergoing surgery for a gunshot wound to the right eye.

Deculit also disliked the man he killed, Russell "Dan" Smith, 44, who worked on the sorting line with him, said another worker, Michael Witkowski.

Postal inspector Ida Gillis said Deculit appeared to have targeted Smith and Chitwood when he began shooting. The third victim was treated for a minor gunshot wound to the foot.

Management pressure to maintain tight mail schedules may have added to the stress on Deculit, postal employees said.

"It is a lot of pressure," postal worker Rose Cross said Friday as she delivered mail on Milwaukee's north side. "They need to lighten up.

"It trickles down all the way, the work hours, the work loads, it's just the pressure of it," Cross said. "You have to do so much in so much time. People just can't tolerate a lot of it. He should have gone home, cooled off, talked to someone."

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Low morale erodes physician health

CMA News 1996; 6 (4): 8

Physicians in Canada and the US suffer from low morale that is adversely affecting their health, experts recently told the International Conference on Physician Health.

"All the stressors facing physicians cause demoralization and increased tension in the workplace," said Dr. Michael Myers, a Vancouver psychiatrist who specializes in treating physicians. "The situation has produced an increasing undercurrent of anxiety in the profession, as physicians are constantly put on the defensive."

Many physicians underestimate their own health needs and don't follow the advice they would give their patients, Dr. Myers said. Although he urged MDs to seek medical or psychiatric help when stress or depression hit hard, he acknowledged that many physicians find it difficult to treat their colleagues: "It's very hard for physicians to help other physicians because we see our own problems and personal failings. It's like looking at the cracks in a mirror."

Many experts at the conference painted bleak portraits of the health of physicians in Canada and the US, citing the rapid changes in health care and the real or perceived loss of clinical autonomy as primary causes. However, Dr. Myers offered hope for physicians who are trying to control their stress and avoid problems that have consumed their colleagues. "Many physicians feel like they are on some sort of treadmill that keeps speeding up, but the key is not to work harder to try to earn more money," said Dr. Myers. "Most physicians work hard to begin with. Instead, I urge physicians to protect the balance in their lives."

More than 250 people attended the 1996 conference in Chandler, Arizona, jointly sponsored by the CMA and the American Medical Association to discuss new information and experience on physician health and ways to prevent or treat the adversities of stressful professional life.



CMA News: April 1996