

Workplace bullying negatively impacts individuals, group

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Capt. Millie Gargurevich, clinical psychology resident, 88th Air Base Wing Mental Health Clinic, provides one-on-one feedback to Airman Isabel Sanchez in a private office setting. Credit: U.S. Air Force Photo/Laura McGowan

Workplace bullying can manifest itself in a multitude of ways in any workplace and if left unchecked, can have a negative impact on the readiness of an organization. Being aware of what workplace bullying looks or sounds like is important for workers and management to understand in order to maintain a healthy organizational climate.

According to Capt. Millie Gargurevich, clinical psychology resident, 88th Air Base Wing Mental Health Clinic, [workplace bullying](#) is a repeated negative behavior by one or more persons with the goal of intimidating or undermining another person(s).

Some bullying behaviors in the workplace are: gossiping, verbal threats, insulting remarks, humiliation, isolation, giving the silent treatment, and setting unreasonable workloads that make the probability of failure extremely high.

"Curiously, workplace bullying often starts and occurs over [digital communication](#), for example, emails, texts and social media, and one in five incidents of bullying occur via digital communication," Capt. Gargurevich said. "Importantly, workplace bullying is different than workplace banter or comments made based on comradery, and workplace bullying tends to occur over time, and it engenders negative feelings for the target, because it often occurs when there is a real or perceived power imbalance between the people involved."

"The implications of bullying are great for both the individual and the organization," said Gargurevich. "Organizationally, studies have found that workplace bullying is a significant predictor of higher attrition, use of sick days and reduced work productivity. At the individual level, victims of workplace bullying endorse higher rates of social withdrawal, job dissatisfaction, depression, anxiety, and resentment towards the organization, which as you can imagine, lead to significant losses and expenses for the organization."

So, what are the dynamics that give fruition to bullying in the workplace?

One of the key dynamics present in a workplace bullying scenario is power imbalance. For example, research has demonstrated a significant effect for gender in relationship to workplace bullying, where women are at higher risk for being bullied compared to men. This gender effect may be due to the higher prevalence of men in leadership roles. Notably, men can be and are also bullied by both men and women in supervisory positions, she explained.

"Interestingly, other underlying dynamics surrounding workplace bullying include personality characteristics and employment longevity," said Gargurevich. "For example, employees who are perceived to be non-confrontational and shy are more likely to be victimized compared to their more assertive and outgoing peers. Moreover, new employees are far more vulnerable to workplace bullying than seasoned employees. In fact, studies have shown that workplace bullies tend to be your most seasoned and recognized employees in the unit, as they have the most status and/or perceived or real power to protect."

She explained in measured detail the topic of favoritism saying, "As scary as it may be to admit this, favoritism occurs for many people in leadership, because our brain is unapologetically biased, and this is normal and expected," she said. "However, favoritism in the workplace becomes problematic when the person in power is unaware that they favor a particular [employee](#)."

She used herself as an example saying, "I came to the U.S. with my mother when I was 10-years-old from Peru, so Spanish is my first language."

"There are times I favor eating lunch with some of my Spanish-speaking

peers," she said. "That's okay for now, but as I rise in rank and take on a leadership position, I have to be cognizant of how this may be perceived by others."

"The saying, 'It's lonely at the top' is true if you are a good leader," Gargurevich said.

That means the supervisor is not selectively picking and choosing individuals to surround themselves with that make them feel good.

How do we mitigate effect of workplace bullying? The first thing to remember is to treat people the way you want to be treated. Saying that is one thing, but actually doing it is another. Here are some examples of things that can be done to help identify and reduce bullying:

- During Wingman Day activities, the 88th Medical Group Mental Health Clinic would welcome an invitation to assist in creating scenarios of workplace bullying and offer feedback, because bullying doesn't always look like bullying.
- Keep small, private mini-meetings with a select few to a minimum. Be inclusive, because everyone has something to bring to the table.
- Rotate and involve all members of the workplace to lead a particular Wingman Day, by providing a little bit about their background and their path to the organization. If they have a disability and are comfortable talking about it, that would be a great opportunity to address the elephant in the room.

The bottom line is that supervisors and those in Air Force leadership positions are required to epitomize Integrity First, Service before Self and Excellence in All We Do, because personnel are our greatest resource.

"Accordingly, leaders should work to create a zero tolerance for bullying in the workplace by talking about workplace bullying, labeling the behavior and establishing internal policies that address," she said.

"Employees would benefit from understanding the concept of workplace bullying and learning cognitive rehearsed responses to bullying, so they feel confident and prepared when confronted in the workplace."

She went on to describe that bystanders (employees who witness the behavior) who have a high sense of self-efficacy are more likely to intervene on behalf of the victim in a workplace bullying scenario.

"For example, a study conducted in 2010 by Stagg and Sheridan examined the effect of a workplace bullying prevention program, consisting of training employees to recognize the top 10 common bullying behaviors in the workplace and use cognitive rehearsed responses," Gargurevich said. "As a result of the prevention training, employees reported feeling more confident and prepared to respond when confronted with bullying in the workplace, and this translated to a 90 percent reduction in workplace bullying incidents in that organization."

Finally, one golden rule for supervisors is to "praise in public and criticize in private," because "offering criticism in a public forum is a form of [workplace](#) bullying," she said. "It is a behavior that more than likely will lead to humiliation for the person being criticized."

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