

Management & Supervisory Notes January 2011

Bullying is not Harmless Fun...and May Soon Be Illegal

"Bullies are always cowards at heart and may be credited with a pretty safe instinct in scenting their prey."
- Anna Julia Cooper, American teacher and writer

"Bullying consists of the least competent most aggressive employee projecting their incompetence on to the least aggressive most competent employee and winning." – Tim Field, prominent British anti-bullying activist

Bullying requires absolutely no talent. Anyone can do it – and do it effectively. We are all familiar with the schoolyard bully. Maybe some of us have even been a bully in the past. At the time, it may have seemed like harmless "fun," for it has only been in recent years that its damage to victims has come into clearer focus. We now also realize that workplace bullying does similar harm to its victims. While there are currently no specific laws against it in the United States, there are individual states as well as other countries working on anti-bullying legislation.

The impacts on victims are too numerous to list here, but the lists made by various expert resources include: anxiety, stress, excessive worry; loss of concentration; disrupted sleep; feeling edgy, irritable, easily startled and constantly on guard (paranoia); stress headaches; obsession over details at work; recurrent memories, nightmares and flashbacks; loss of self-esteem; *and the lists go on ...*

"Workplace bullying - in any form - is bad for business. It destroys teamwork, commitment and morale." - Tony Morgan, Chief Executive, The Industrial Society

If ever there was a time for us to deal with the bullies in our midst (or in ourselves), it is now when the economic worries and realities of the work world are, in general, brutal in their impacts. Some things to look for: intimidating behaviors (yelling, glaring, staring); discounting the person's thoughts, feelings, or contributions ("Oh, that's silly") in meetings; separating or isolating the person from others through exclusion or "icing out"; making "fun" of the person; finding the person's "Achilles heel" or "hot button" and keep picking at it – sometimes telling the person they are too sensitive; *and this list goes on as well...*

We must take our responsibilities as supervisors seriously, starting by monitoring our own behaviors – making sure that we are not making jokes at the others' expense. We can watch reactions for how our communications are received. *And, no, this doesn't mean that we aren't to responsibly address misconduct or performance issues – even if the employee does not respond well.* But, we should make sure any comments we make are necessary, professional, and helpful. And, we must make serious effort to assure that no employee is being singled out for "humor," "fun," or "building someone's ego" at their expense.

Bullying is immoral and certainly a counter-productive abuse of power. We have the means to effectively address bullying. Let's do so and assure that Pinellas County government is a healthy workplace for all!

For more information, see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Workplace_bullying