

Hyena on your back

Workplace bullying and violence

Workplace bullying and violence can leave people traumatised. **Susan Steinman** examines this growing trend in the workplace and advises that it needs to be urgently addressed through a Code of Best Practice to Prevent Workplace Violence.

“I am a project manager, recently employed at a government department and have been an employee for the past three months. I am enduring workplace violence at my place of employment, experiencing hostility from my peers. I have informed my senior manager about this abuse, and his recommendation further alienated me from my peers, causing them to question my abilities. I currently am a victim and feel my position is in jeopardy due to the stress that is affecting my ability to function normally both at and outside work. What recourse do I have to stop this abuse before it forces me to resign? Please help me.”

It is possible that many readers could relate to this event or may even have experienced much worse abuse or bullying at the hands of a co-worker or supervisor. This is one of the many case studies that I relate in my book on workplace violence *Don't take SH*T from Hyenas in the workplace*.

Workplace violence takes many forms both physical and emotional including bullying and mobbing (collective bullying), verbal abuse, racial and sexual harassment and the use of open or hidden threats. It has become a global problem crossing borders, work settings and occupational groups. Violence at

work has dramatically gained momentum in recent years and is now a priority concern in both industrialised and developing countries.

A heightened awareness of the seriousness of workplace violence and bullying is growing. The focus on workplace violence won't go away and the Workplace Dignity Institute is working with trade unions to tackle the problem. Members are increasingly requesting their unions to assist them in cases of workplace violence and bullying.

PERPETRATORS OF BULLYING

To relay the seriousness of workplace violence in the book, the metaphor of the hyena is used. In particular the book describes the perpetrators of workplace bullying. It distinguishes between the Power Hyena with its 'royal echelon' namely the Makhulu (Strategist), and the Squeeza (protégé or favourite of the strategist). To bring the issues alive the book refers to different types of Power Hyenas as Laughing Hyenas, Quiet Hyenas, Halo Hyenas and Mamparas. The Competitive Hyenas are dangerous, but the 'intelligence gatherers' or Impimpi Hyenas are Den Creepers and Shit-stirrers while the Loner Hyena now-and-then shows some 'hyena traits'.

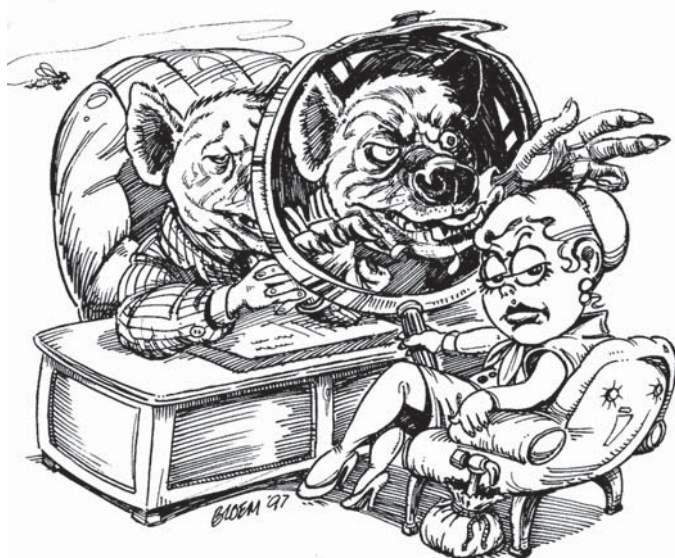
The devious nature of the

Workplace Hyena is illustrated in a case study that describes the executive who gives his personal assistant an entertainment allowance to take staff members out to dinner. These staff members were unaware that the boss had paid for an evening out with his caring assistant and her husband – with a hidden agenda. The assistant's orders were to catch them in a moment of 'social weakness' in order to obtain their opinions on the boss and to find out whether they were doing their jobs well, or whether they might just have a backlog of work he was not aware about. Once the manager got the necessary information, he would 'discover' the problems with dire consequences and without giving his source away.

You could argue that the personal assistant was forced into becoming a perpetrator or hyena, but she nevertheless exercised free will to become a 'satellite' for her hyena boss. It is a form of covert bullying. Covert bullying can also take the form of suggestion and gossip which persistently tarnish someone's image.

Workplace bullying happens when colleagues feel their position or authority is threatened. The corporate culture may encourage overt or covert violence.

A good example is the CEO or supervisor who screams and shouts.



These 'shows' are usually a smoke screen for poorly developed people skills.

However, managerial and organisational factors are to blame for a large amount of workplace violence and bullying. Changes, restructuring, mergers and looming retrenchments can spark off workplace wars in a normally peaceful environment.

HUMAN RIGHTS AND CODE OF CONDUCT

Hyena stories aside. Do we have a serious definition of workplace violence? Workplace violence is the occurrence of single or cumulative incidents where employees are physically assaulted or attacked, and/or emotionally abused, pressurised, harassed or threatened (overtly, covertly, directly or indirectly) in work circumstances with the likelihood that it will impair the right to dignity, physical or emotional safety, well-being, work performance and social development.

South African labour legislation does not explicitly target workplace violence or bullying. Many employers delay addressing workplace bullying, confident that their anti-violence/harassment policies are sufficient. This confidence, however, is frequently misplaced because much of the bullying that takes place in the workplace is not covered by any policy.

For example, bullying can be

extremely damaging without progressing to a point where physical violence, or even a threat thereof, becomes a factor. Anti-harassment policies are usually based on definitions in the Bill of Rights, and a great deal of bullying is completely unrelated to the prohibited grounds they cite.

We urgently need a Code of Conduct to Prevent Workplace Violence and a Victim Charter. If Canada, Australia and European Union countries can put effective measures in place, we can do the same.

According to an article that appeared in the Canadian press, the federal government in Ottawa, Canada, recently adopted new legislation that aims to prevent violence in federally regulated workplaces. The legislation covers all forms of violence, including psychological harassment. It requires employers to develop policies and programmes dealing with such issues as bullying, teasing and other harmful behaviour. The regulations also require employers to assess their programmes' effectiveness every three years and update them. The Canadian Labour Congress has endorsed the violence-prevention measures, saying that they are "the best and most comprehensive" in Canada.

Workplace violence affects the dignity of millions of people worldwide. It is a major source of inequality, discrimination,

stigmatisation and conflict at the workplace. Increasingly it is becoming a central human rights issue. It is also possible to argue that this definition provides for "structural" or "systemic" violence, where systems and structures deny the employee the right to dignity and well-being in the workplace.

Workplace bullying (which often overlaps with other forms of emotional violence) is a devastating experience and should not be confused with the odd confrontation, single incidents or isolated shows of anger. Pressure or stress-related irritability, unless persistent, can also not qualify as bullying – neither can justifiable reprimands.

Bullying and mobbing are malicious, intentional and hurt. It is persistent, prolonged or happens over a period of time.

Victims often compare the experience of bullying or violence in the workplace to being a victim of rape or child abuse. The wounds are deep and victims hurt for many years. In a way, the dignity of the victim is restored by recognising bullying as emotional violence.

NOT A PERSONALITY ISSUE

Workplace violence has a devastating effect on the victims' productivity, emotional and physical health. More often than not, victims blame themselves and doubt their self-worth. Plagued by feelings of helplessness and hopelessness and inadequate support from colleagues, victims may suffer post traumatic stress symptoms.

As one victim described it on e-mail: "There is a huge difference in the pre-bullied me and the post-bullied me. At present I jump at the sight of my own shadow, am terrified of meeting people, am unable to make eye-contact with people, get extremely agitated if people raise

their voices. At first glance someone might easily think, no wonder she was bullied, she no self-confidence or anything! Yet, these things are not the 'real' me. It is just the way my trauma manifests itself."

Professionals and the public are often misled by the vulnerability of the post-bullied person. Generally, the trauma of the experience leaves the victim feeling powerless, disorientated, confused, helpless and paralysed. It tends to be sudden and overwhelming – as if it owns the person.

The problem is that the victim is equated with a 'loser'. Victims are often 'profiled' by researchers. While there are some high-risk variables such as age, gender and social status, researchers should be more cautious about applying information obtained from traumatised persons. The argument that certain personal characteristics can cause bullying is faulty.

Bullying and emotional abuse cannot be justified as a personality issue, it is a human rights issue and is downright wrong. By profiling victims we are implying that some people deserve abusive behaviour. We should get rid of the 'victim blame' syndrome, because this is a dangerous mindset and ammunition for abusers – akin to women batterers who claim that the woman 'asked' for it, or the rapist who claims that the victim wasn't dressed appropriately. Similarly, the renaming

of victims to targets or survivors may sound better but once again the denial of victim status is simply symptomatic of the victim=loser equation.

WORKPLACE VIOLENCE IN SA

Research in South Africa indicates high levels of workplace violence in all sectors. A cross-country research project conducted for the International Labour Organization, the International Council of Nurses, the World Health Organization and Public Service International and a survey at a tertiary institution in South Africa (2007) showed a widespread problem which prevails on all levels in the workplace.

From the table it is clear that South Africa needs a Code of Good Practice to Prevent Workplace Violence, because it is preventable. What is worrying is that almost two-thirds of the victims in both surveys who indicated that they experienced either physical or emotional violence, also indicated symptoms associated with burnout and/or a Post Traumatic Stress Reaction. This in turn impacts negatively on work performance.

Given the impact of HIV/AIDS on the workforce, as well as the trauma of high levels of crime in South Africa, it is essential that government take the lead and address workplace violence. It is not only a moral obligation to protect the dignity and safety of all workers, it will also raise

productivity.

Treating people fairly, with dignity and respect is the core of violence prevention. However, we must not neglect the organisational environmental issues that also impact on workplace violence. We can think of issues such as work design, management style, communication, hiring, retention, noise pollution, work overload, ergonomics – the list is endless. Ultimately everything impacts on workplace violence.

Workplace violence and stress is interrelated and one can trigger the other. We need employers to understand workplace violence and why a violence policy is essential. The Workplace Dignity Institute has a Code of Best Practice to Prevent Workplace Violence as well as a Victim Charter and its training in violence prevention is based on the ILO/ICN/WHO/PSI Framework Guidelines.

The Code focuses on both outsiders and employees perpetrating violence and the necessity for appropriate security measures. The workplace violence policy should be reviewed on a regular basis and should address other psychosocial problems, such as substance abuse, stress and financial management.

The workplace must be safe. It is no longer a luxury to provide employees with standards of courtesy, diversity training and crisis response training. LB

*Susan Steinman is CEO of the Workplace Dignity Institute and can be contacted on (011) 664-6527 or susan@worktrauma.org "Don't take SH*T from Hyenas in the workplace" is available from book stores or the online web store at <http://www.worktrauma.org/susantore.htm>*

Type of Violence (at least 1 incident in 12 month period)	Health Sector (2001)		SA Tertiary Institution (2007)		
	Public	Private	Academic Staff	Non- Academic	Auxiliary/ Support
Physical violence	17%	9.1%	5.00%	8.60%	10.10%
Bullying/mobbing	24.4%	16.3%	39.30%	41.70%	21.50%
Verbal abuse	60.1%	42.8%	54.20%	55.00%	32.50%
Racial harassment	27.1%	17.4%	22.40%	34.45%	14.50%
Sexual harassment	4.8%	4.4%	7.20%	7.70%	4.50%